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ATLAS BOSTON DYNAMICS

DUNE: PART 2 PREMIERE

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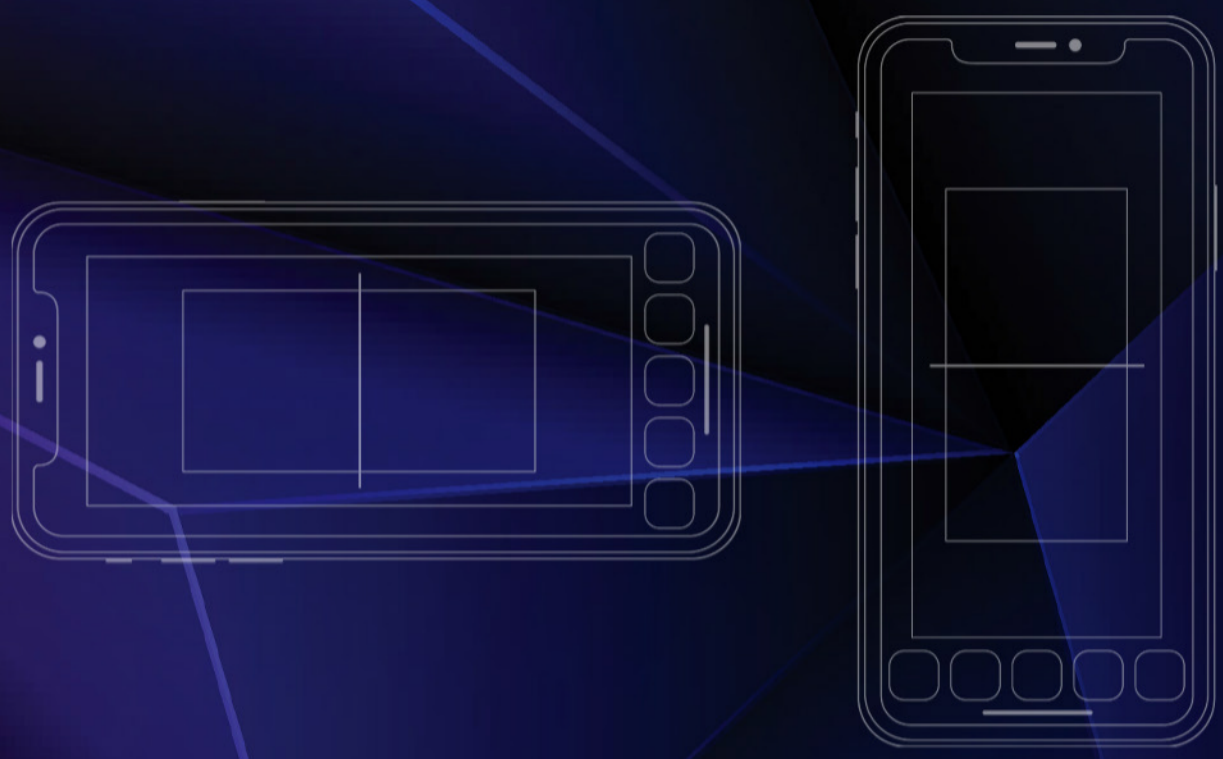

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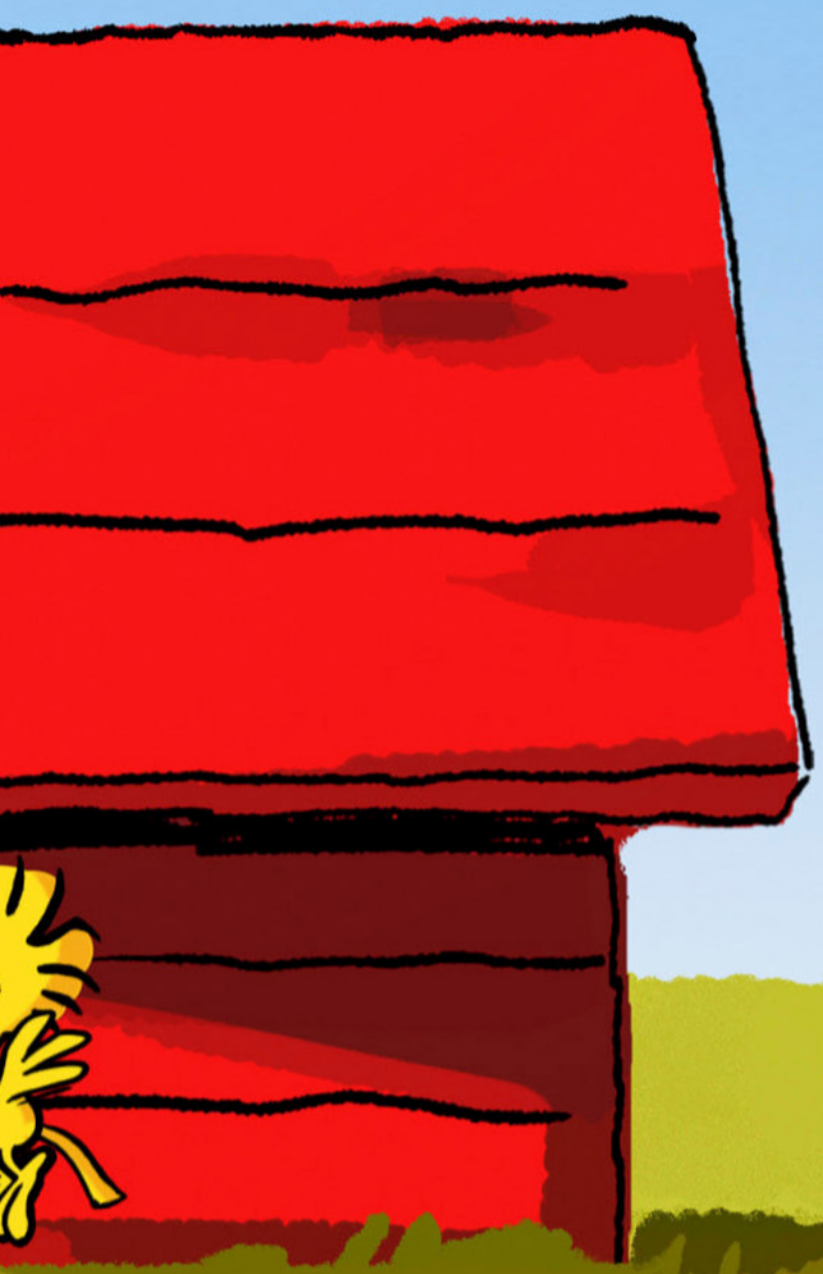
FRANKLIN FROM ‘PEANUTS’ GETS TO SHINE IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF A NEW ANIMATED APPLE TV+ SPECIAL

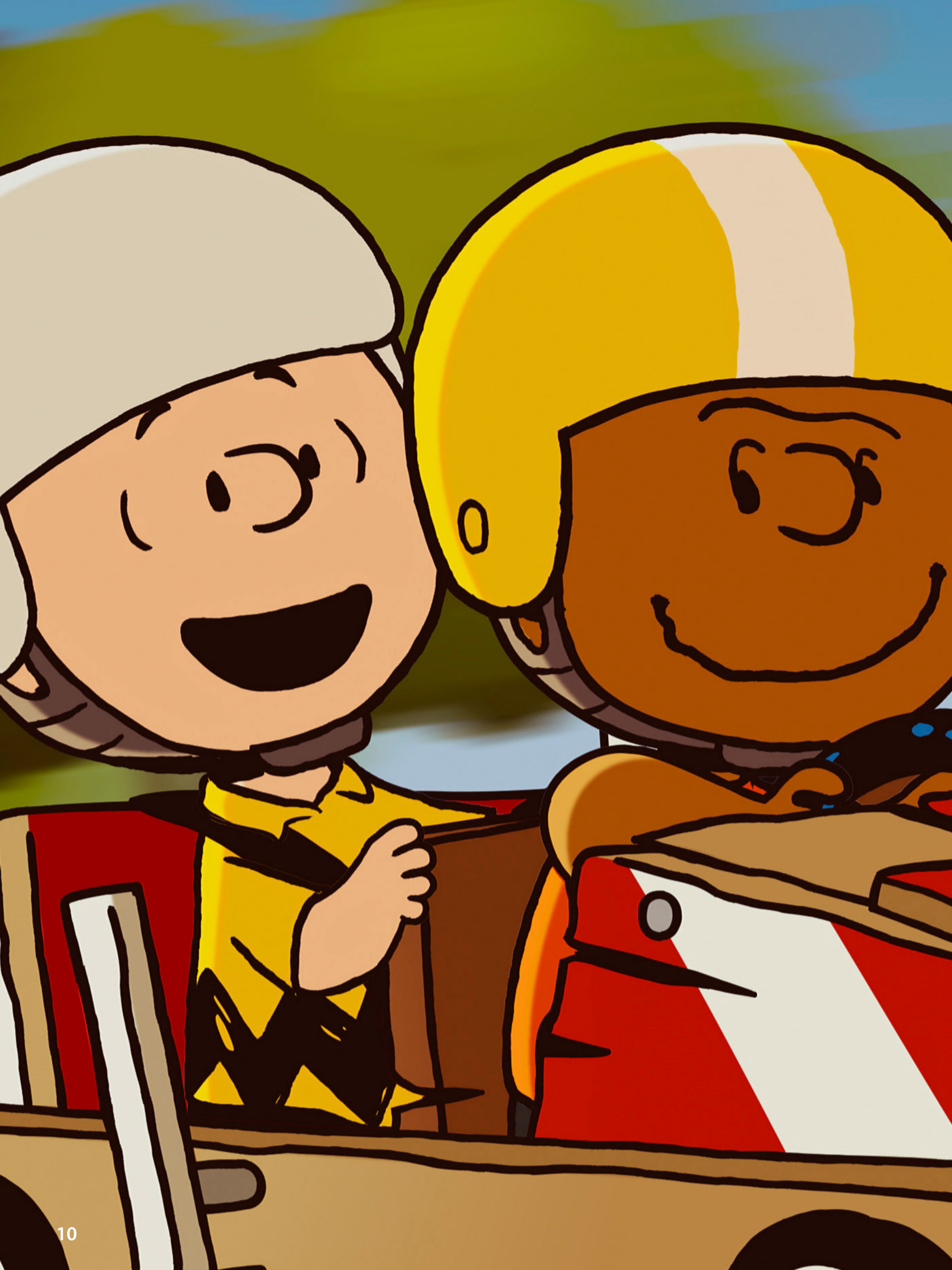


The mild-mannered Franklin — the first Black character in the "Peanuts" comic strip — gets to shine in his own animated Apple TV+ special this month in a story about friendship.

Franklin is a newcomer who bonds with Charlie Brown and is welcomed to the Peanuts universe in "Snoopy Presents: Welcome Home, Franklin," which premieres on Friday.

Co-writer Robb Armstrong, the cartoonist behind the "Jump Start" strip., says he's building on the blueprints that "Peanuts" creator Charles Schulz left. "Whenever you start with good ingredients, you have to work hard to make a bad cake out of it," he says.

Race is never explicitly mentioned but Armstrong and co-writer Scott Montgomery make a subtle nod when Franklin surveys the kids in his new town and remarks, "One thing was for sure: There was a lack of variety in this place."



WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT FRANKLIN FROM 'PEANUTS'

First appearance: On July 31, 1968, on a beach, Franklin brings back a wayward beach ball to a grateful Charlie Brown.

What prompted his arrival: Creator Charles Schulz exchanged letters with Harriet Glickman, a teacher and advocate, regarding the addition of a Black character in "Peanuts" in the wake of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Schulz agreed.

Franklin's life: He plays baseball and is learning guitar, he's a member of a swim club and of 4H. He goes to school with Peppermint Patty and Marcie but visits his friend Charlie Brown in a nearby neighborhood.

What's new: The new Franklin special is co-written by cartoonist Robb Armstrong, who is Franklin Armstrong's namesake and now plays a key part in Peanuts Worldwide's The Armstrong Project.

"I never wanted to come off preachy or anything, but it needed to be handled in the same way that I handled it in 'Jump Start,'" says Armstrong. "I don't come out and call people anything. I let the characters participate in a problem solving process."

The portrait of Franklin that emerges is of a boy who likes baseball and outer space, is good with his hands and listens to Stevie Wonder, Little Richard, James Brown and John Coltrane.

When he arrives in town, he's tired of a life constantly moving, since his father's military job takes them from location to location. "I have lived in lot of different places but none that I can call home," he says.

But his introduction to the "Peanuts" gang initially goes poorly. He mistakes Lucy's psychiatric booth for a lemonade stand and he freaks Linus out by picking a pumpkin from his patch. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear I was in 'The Twilight Zone,'" Franklin says.

"Every time he's moved, he's had to learn how to make friends quick and that meant that he didn't feel he could ever be his authentic self," said director and story editor Raymond S. Persi. "So when he comes to this town, his normal tricks don't work because these are kind of weird kids."

Franklin made his first appearance in the newspaper strip on July 31, 1968, prompted by a request from a school teacher for Schulz to integrate his comic strip world in the wake of the assassination of The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Schulz introduced him by having Franklin return Charlie Brown's wayward beach ball one day by the sea. It was a historical meeting and

FRIENDSHIP
1

a statement: Many public beaches, like other public facilities such as schools, swimming pools, theaters and restaurants, were segregated at the time.

The new Apple TV+ special recreates that first meeting, with Franklin returning Charlie Brown's errant beach ball and then the two building a sandcastle together.

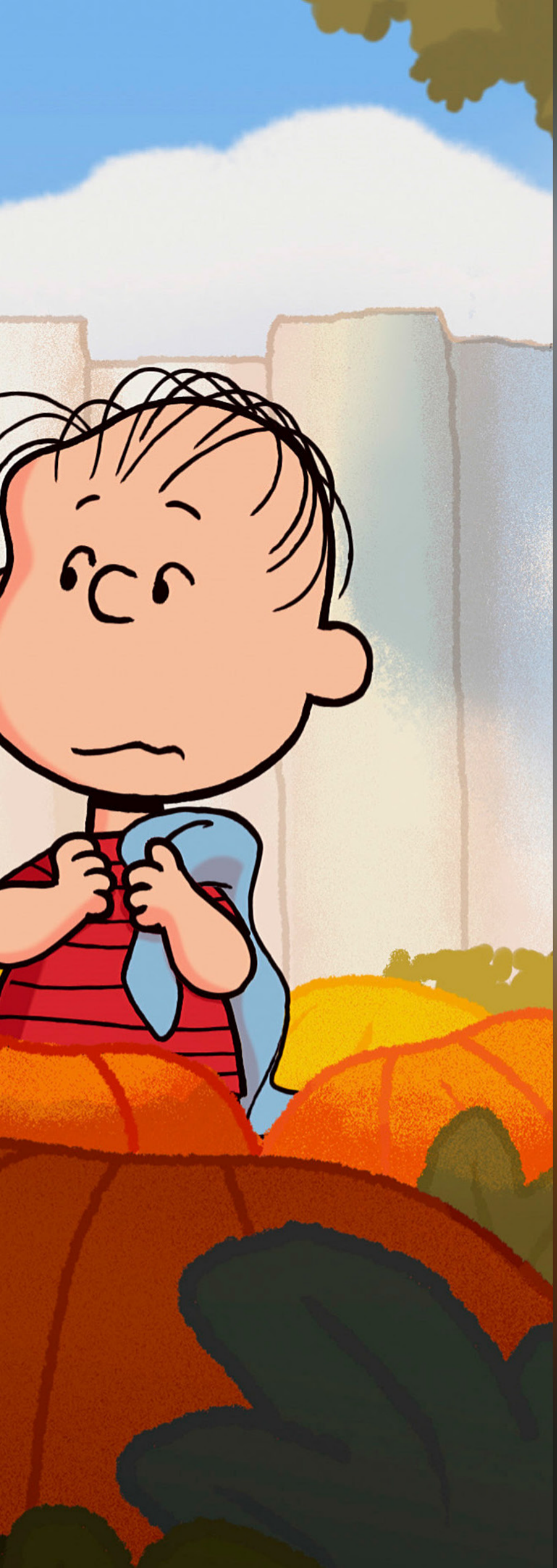
"To have this very simple idea of two children who don't know about racism, having fun playing at the beach, building something together, I think was just so smart," said Persi.

Franklin and Charlie Brown soon enter a soap box derby competition and their friendship is tested before a deep bond is forged. "They're not perfect. I'm not perfect. But we can get through the rough spots together, as friends," Franklin says.

"What I really like about the special is you're getting a chance to see this friendship kind of grow in real time, in the way that real friendships do," says Persi, who has directed animated projects with "The Simpsons," Mickey Mouse and the Minions.

As usual for a "Peanuts" show, music plays a key role. Original music by Jeff Morrow leans into sophisticated jazz and, in nods to Franklin, Berry's "Johnny B. Goode,""Nothing from Nothing" by Billy Preston and some Coltrane playing on a jukebox.

Armstrong has also used the special to correct some misperceptions about the 1973 classic "A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving." In that special, Franklin sits by himself on one side of the Thanksgiving table, leading some to suggest he's not been fully embraced. In the new special, Franklin is specifically asked to come sit



with his new pals on their side during a pizza party celebration.

Armstrong says he started with that scene and then had to figure out how the gang got there. The writers came up with a soap box derby. "We needed something that was very highly action-oriented and packed with great risk. It had to be a competition," Armstrong says.

The special has plenty of lessons for kids and adults — winning isn't everything, friendships can be messy but rewarding and be your authentic self.

"What I'd like people to get out of it is that you don't have to be something different for other people. Being yourself is what's going to bring the right people into your lives," says Persi.

Armstrong, who grew up revering Schulz, has a deep connection to Franklin. He became a cartoonist and a friend to Schulz. It was Schulz himself who asked the younger cartoonist if he would lend his last name to the character. So to have him years later spotlight Franklin in a TV special seems almost divine intervention.

"Sometimes a miracle happens," says Armstrong. "If someone's got a better answer, I'd love to hear it. I'm just convinced that sometimes God gets involved. And this is that."

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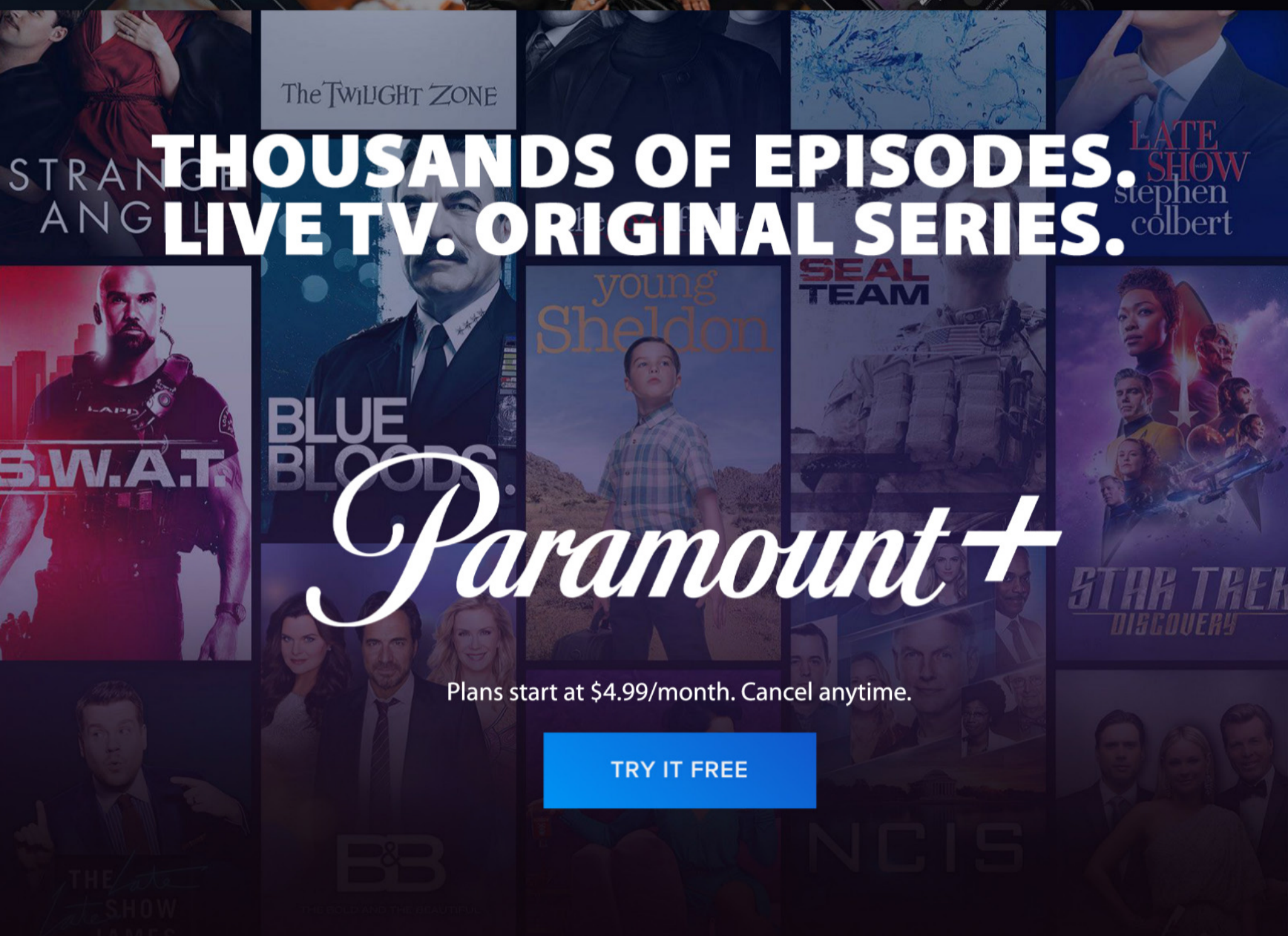

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CISCO SYSTEMS TO LAY OFF MORE THAN 4,000 WORKERS IN LATEST SIGN OF TIGHTER TIMES IN TECH

Internet networking pioneer Cisco Systems is jettisoning more than 4,000 employees, joining the parade of technology companies in a trend that has helped boost their profits and stock prices while providing a sobering reminder of the job insecurity hanging over an industry increasingly embracing artificial intelligence.

The mass layoffs announced Wednesday in conjunction with Cisco's latest quarterly results represent about 5% of its worldwide workforce of 84,900. The purge follows Cisco's late 2022 cutbacks that shed 5,000 workers and ahead of its $28 billion acquisition of Splunk, a deal that

CISCO
System
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management now expects to complete by April 30. Cisco — a company best known for making much of the technology that connects the internet — expects its reorganization to cost an additional $800 million.

The double whammy of two big layoffs in two years has been a phenomenon affecting other prominent technology companies, such as Google and Amazon, both of which have trimmed their once-steadily growing payrolls multiple times since the end of 2022.

The reductions are being made even though most of the companies are still big moneymakers. Cisco, which is based in San Jose, California, earned $2.6 billion, or 65 cents per share, during its fiscal second quarter covering October-January, a 5% decrease from the same time during the previous year. Revenue for the period fell 6% from the prior year to $12.8 billion.

But Cisco foresees sluggish demand for its products and software services during the next three to six months while its customers exercise "a greater degree of caution" amid an uncertain economic outlook, CEO Chuck Robbins said Wednesday during a conference call with analysts.

Cisco's streamlining follows a succession of significant layoffs since the beginning of the year at Microsoft, TikTok, Riot Games, eBay and PayPal, in addition to both Google and Alphabet. Combined with a wave of layoffs last year, the workforce reductions have helped the companies lift their already lofty profits even higher — a goal that has also elevated their collective market values.

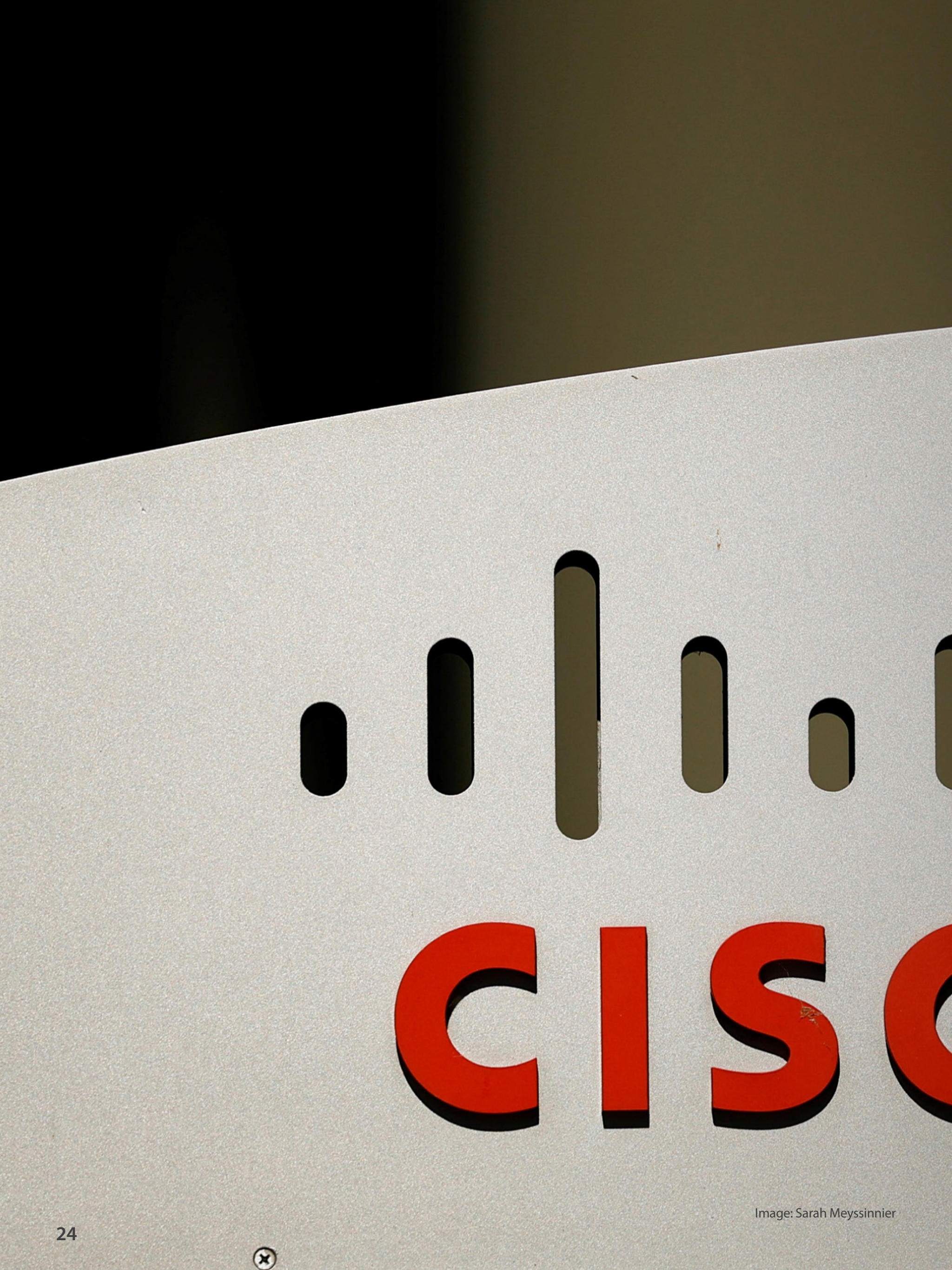


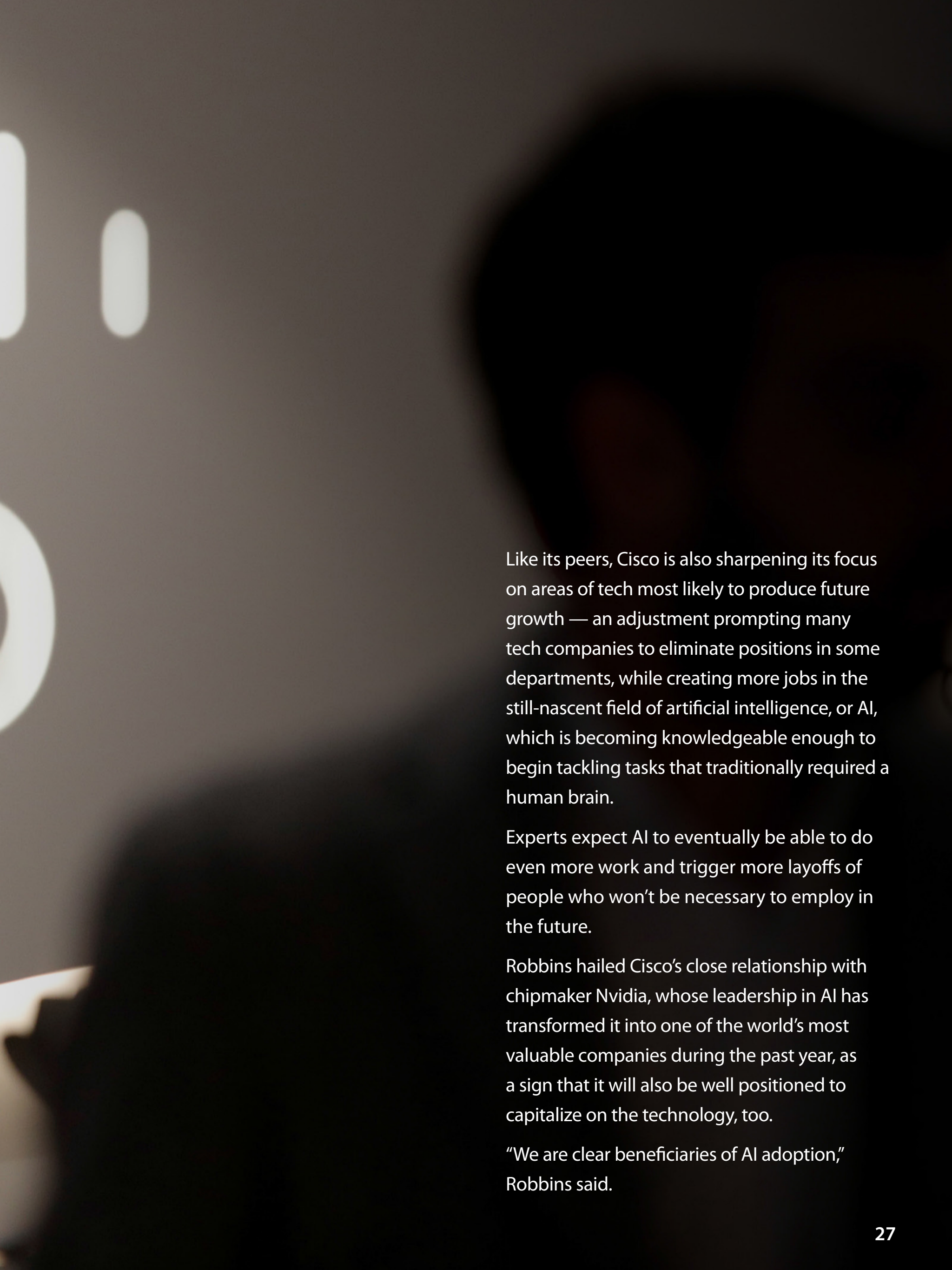
Image: Sarah Meyssinnier

Since the end of 2022, the tech-driven Nasdaq composite index has soared by about 50% in a rally that has put it back within reach of its all-time high hit in 2021 when pandemic-driven lockdowns shifted more of the economy to online services.

But Cisco's stock price has gained just 6% during the same period, a factor that might have played into management's decision to make even deeper payroll cuts than some of the company's tech brethren. And most of that paltry gain now appears poised to evaporate, with Cisco's shares shedding nearly 6% in Wednesday's extended trading after its latest quarterly numbers and lackluster forecast came out.

Despite the waves of layoffs washing over the tech industry, the U.S. economy has continued to add jobs at a robust rate that has kept the country's unemployment rate at 3.7%, just above a half-century low.

Image: Philippe Wojazer



Like its peers, Cisco is also sharpening its focus on areas of tech most likely to produce future growth — an adjustment prompting many tech companies to eliminate positions in some departments, while creating more jobs in the still-nascent field of artificial intelligence, or AI, which is becoming knowledgeable enough to begin tackling tasks that traditionally required a human brain.

Experts expect AI to eventually be able to do even more work and trigger more layoffs of people who won't be necessary to employ in the future.

Robbins hailed Cisco's close relationship with chipmaker Nvidia, whose leadership in AI has transformed it into one of the world's most valuable companies during the past year, as a sign that it will also be well positioned to capitalize on the technology, too.

"We are clear beneficiaries of AI adoption," Robbins said.

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NEW YORK CITY FILES A LAWSUIT SAYING SOCIAL MEDIA IS FUELING A YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

New York City, its schools and public hospital system announced a lawsuit against the tech giants that run Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube, blaming their "addictive and dangerous" social media platforms for fueling a childhood mental health crisis that is disrupting learning and draining resources.

Children and adolescents are especially susceptible to harm because their brains are not fully developed, the lawsuit said.

"Youth are now addicted to defendants' platforms in droves," according to the 311-page filing in Superior Court in California, where the companies are headquartered.

The country's largest school district, with about 1 million students, has had to respond to disruptions in and out of the classroom, provide counseling for anxiety and depression, and develop curricula about the effects of social media and how to stay safe online, according to the filing. The city spends more than $100 million on youth mental health programs and services each year, Mayor Eric Adams' office said.

"Over the past decade, we have seen just how addictive and overwhelming the online world can be, exposing our children to a non-stop stream of harmful content and fueling our national youth mental health crisis," Adams said.

The legal action is the latest of numerous lawsuits filed by states,school districts and others claiming social media companies exploit children and adolescents by deliberating designing features that keep them endlessly scrolling and checking their accounts.

Teenagers know they spend too much time on social media but are powerless to stop, according to the new lawsuit, filed by the city of New York, its Department of Education and New York City Health and Hospitals Corp., the country's largest public hospital system.

The lawsuit seeks to have the companies' conduct declared a public nuisance to be abated, as well as unspecified monetary damages.

In responses to the filing, the tech companies said they have and continue to develop and implement policies and controls that emphasize user safety.

"The allegations in this complaint are simply not true," said José Castañeda, a spokesman for YouTube parent Google, who said by email that the company has collaborated with youth, mental health and parenting experts.

A TikTok spokesperson cited similar regular collaborations to understand best practices in the face of industry-wide challenges.

"TikTok has industry-leading safeguards to support teens' well-being, including age-restricted features, parental controls, an automatic 60-minute time limit for users under 18, and more," an emailed statement said.

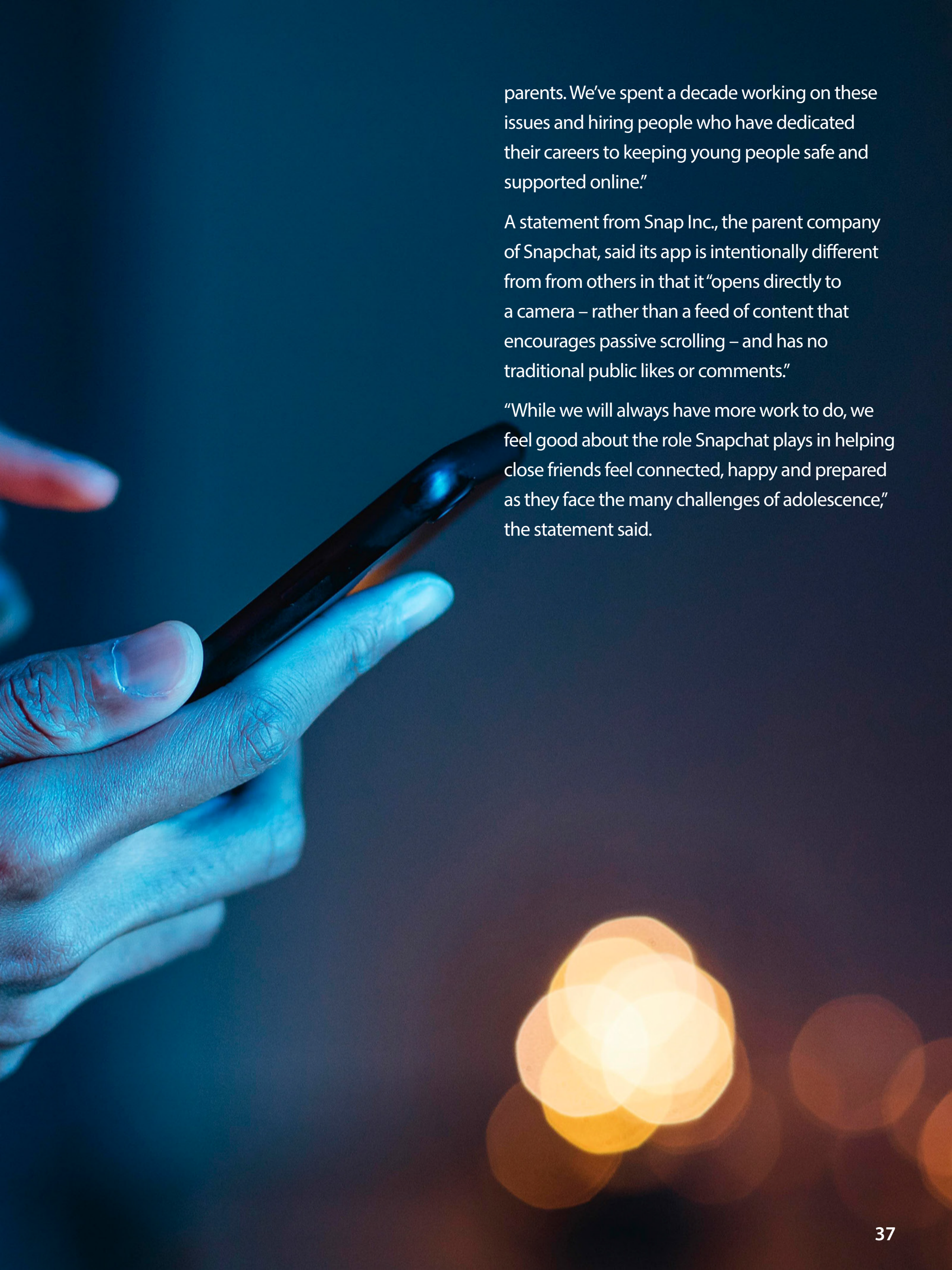
Virtually all U.S. teenagers use social media, and roughly one in six teens describe their use of YouTube and TikTok as "almost constant," according to the Pew Research Center.

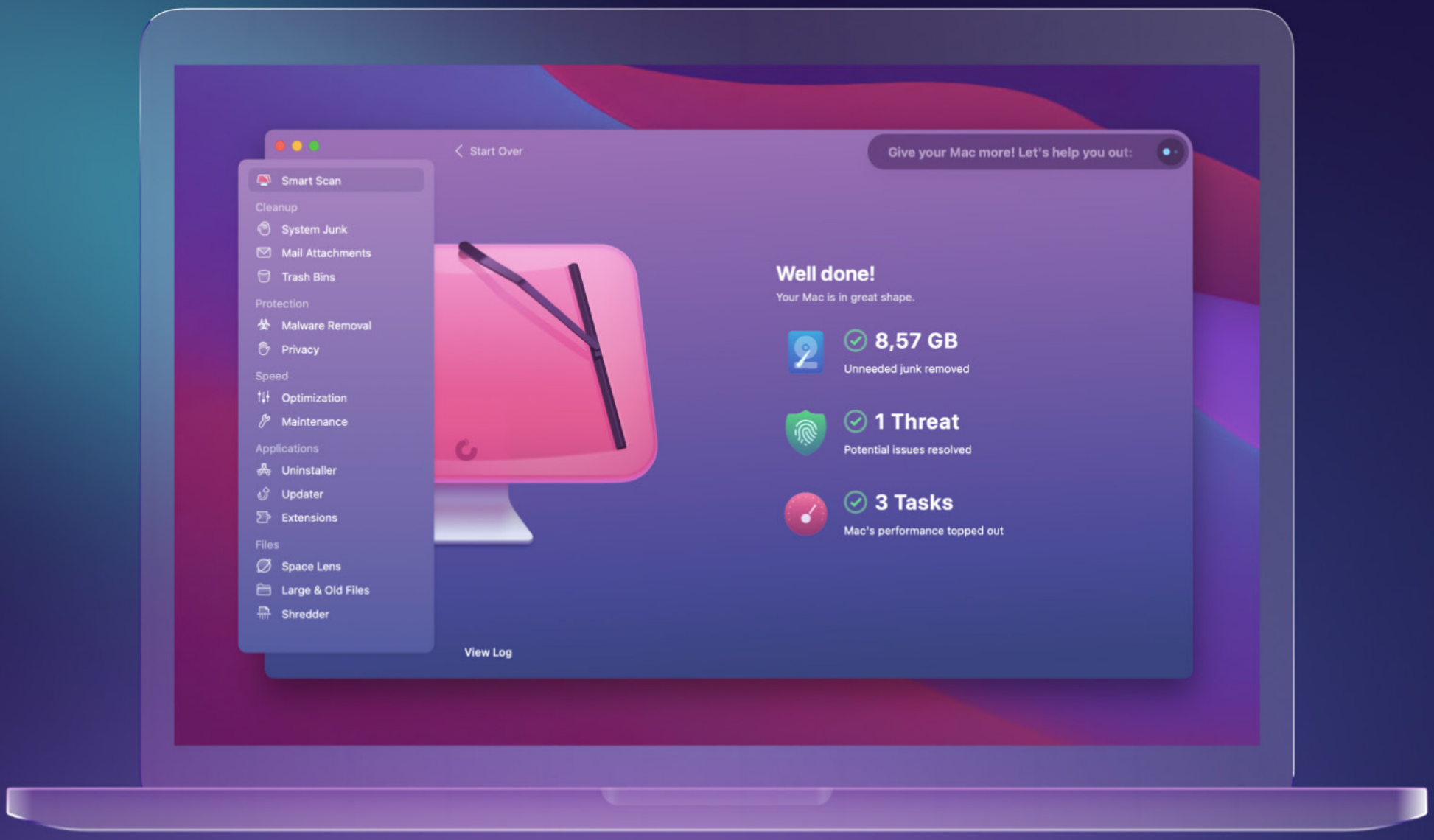
A spokesperson for Meta, which owns and operates Facebook and Instagram, said the company wants "teens to have safe, age-appropriate experiences online, and we have over 30 tools and features to support them and their

parents. We've spent a decade working on these issues and hiring people who have dedicated their careers to keeping young people safe and supported online."

A statement from Snap Inc., the parent company of Snapchat, said its app is intentionally different from from others in that it "opens directly to a camera – rather than a feed of content that encourages passive scrolling – and has no traditional public likes or comments."

"While we will always have more work to do, we feel good about the role Snapchat plays in helping close friends feel connected, happy and prepared as they face the many challenges of adolescence," the statement said.





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TINDER, HINGE AND OTHER DATING APPS ENCOURAGE ‘COMPULSIVE’ USE, LAWSUIT CLAIMS

Image: Tsering Topgyal

Stuck in a dating app loop with no date in sight? A lawsuit filed Wednesday against Match Group claims that is by design.

Tinder, Hinge and other Match dating apps are filled with addictive features that encourage "compulsive" use, the proposed class-action lawsuit claims.

The lawsuit filed in federal court in the Northern District of California on Wednesday — Valentine's Day — says Match intentionally designs its dating platforms with game-like features that "lock users into a perpetual pay-to-play loop" prioritizing profit over promises to help users find relationships.

This, the suit claims, turns users into "addicts" who purchase ever-more-expensive subscriptions to access special features that promise romance and matches.

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4:06

Help Center

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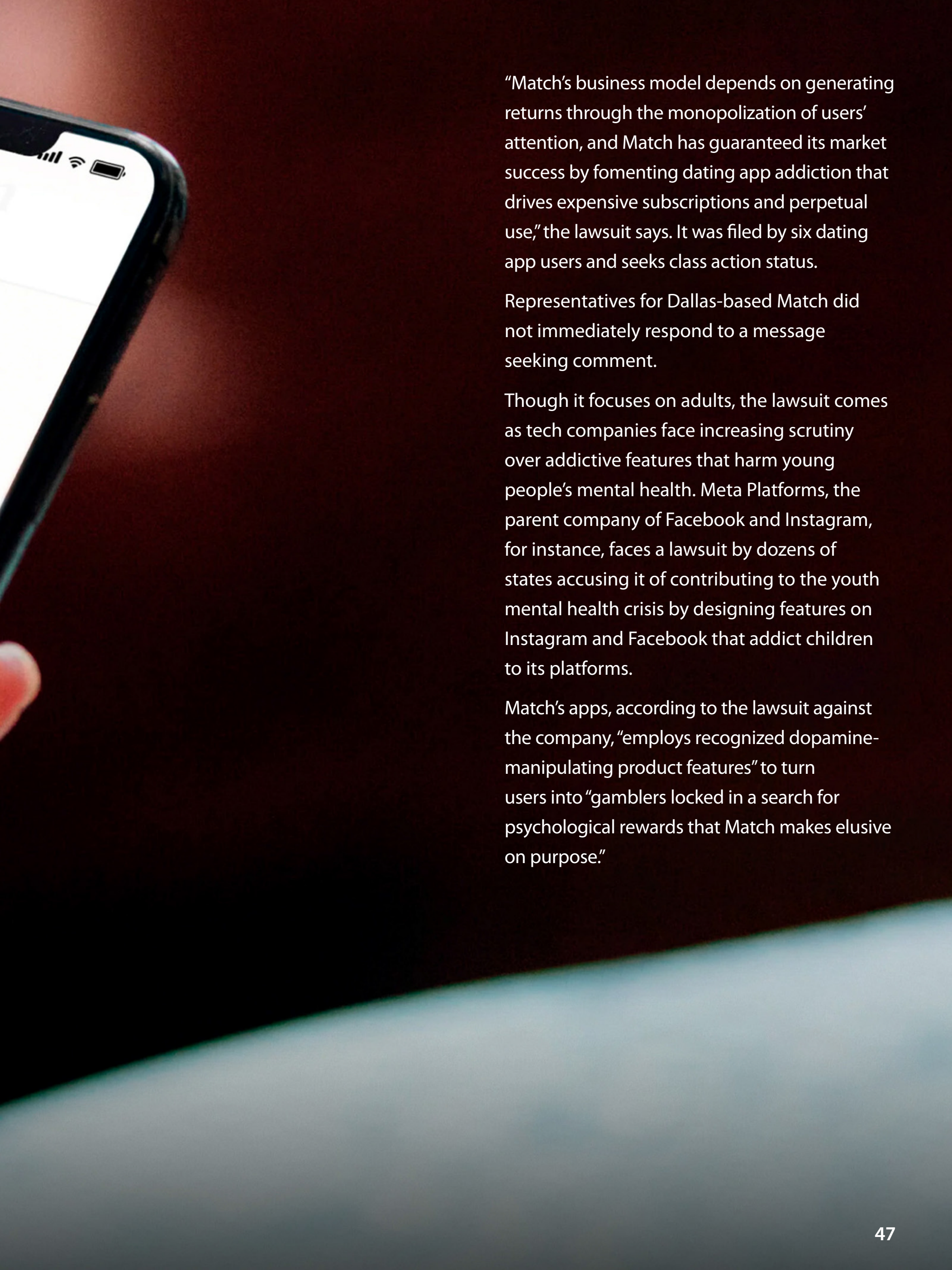
"The beauty of intimacy is feeling safe and free in each other's fullness, and I always want the people I like to feel completely free in their gender fluidity with me."



"Match's business model depends on generating returns through the monopolization of users' attention, and Match has guaranteed its market success by fomenting dating app addiction that drives expensive subscriptions and perpetual use," the lawsuit says. It was filed by six dating app users and seeks class action status.

Representatives for Dallas-based Match did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

Though it focuses on adults, the lawsuit comes as tech companies face increasing scrutiny over addictive features that harm young people's mental health. Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, for instance, faces a lawsuit by dozens of states accusing it of contributing to the youth mental health crisis by designing features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms.

Match's apps, according to the lawsuit against the company, "employs recognized dopamine-manipulating product features" to turn users into "gamblers locked in a search for psychological rewards that Match makes elusive on purpose."

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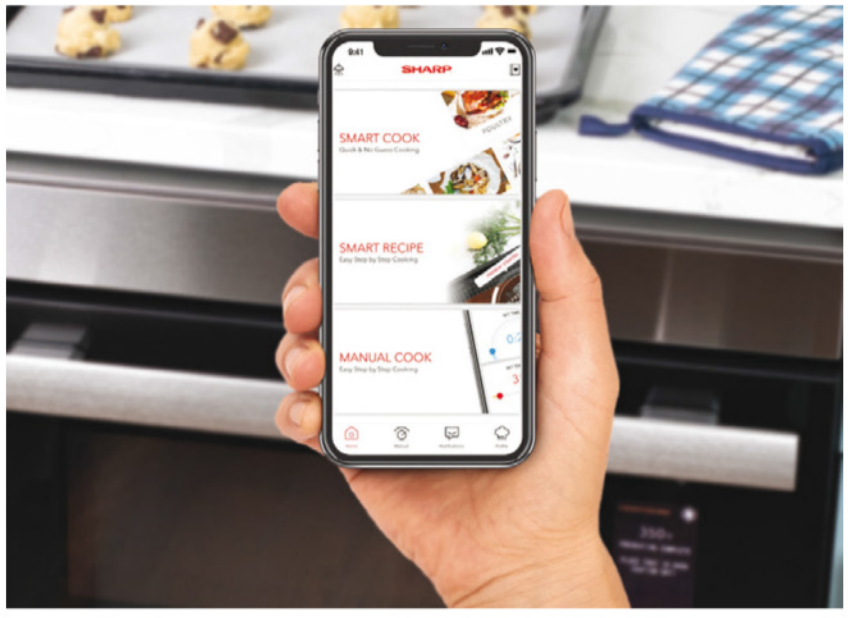

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Would you like me to change anything about how we communicate or how I talk?
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AMID ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE BOOM, AI GIRLFRIENDS, AND BOYFRIENDS, ARE MAKING THEIR MARK

A few months ago, Derek Carrier started seeing someone and became infatuated.

He experienced a "ton" of romantic feelings but he also knew it was an illusion.

That's because his girlfriend was generated by artificial intelligence.

Carrier wasn't looking to develop a relationship with something that wasn't real, nor did he want to become the brunt of online jokes. But he did want a romantic partner he'd never had, in part because of a genetic disorder called Marfan syndrome that makes traditional dating tough for him.

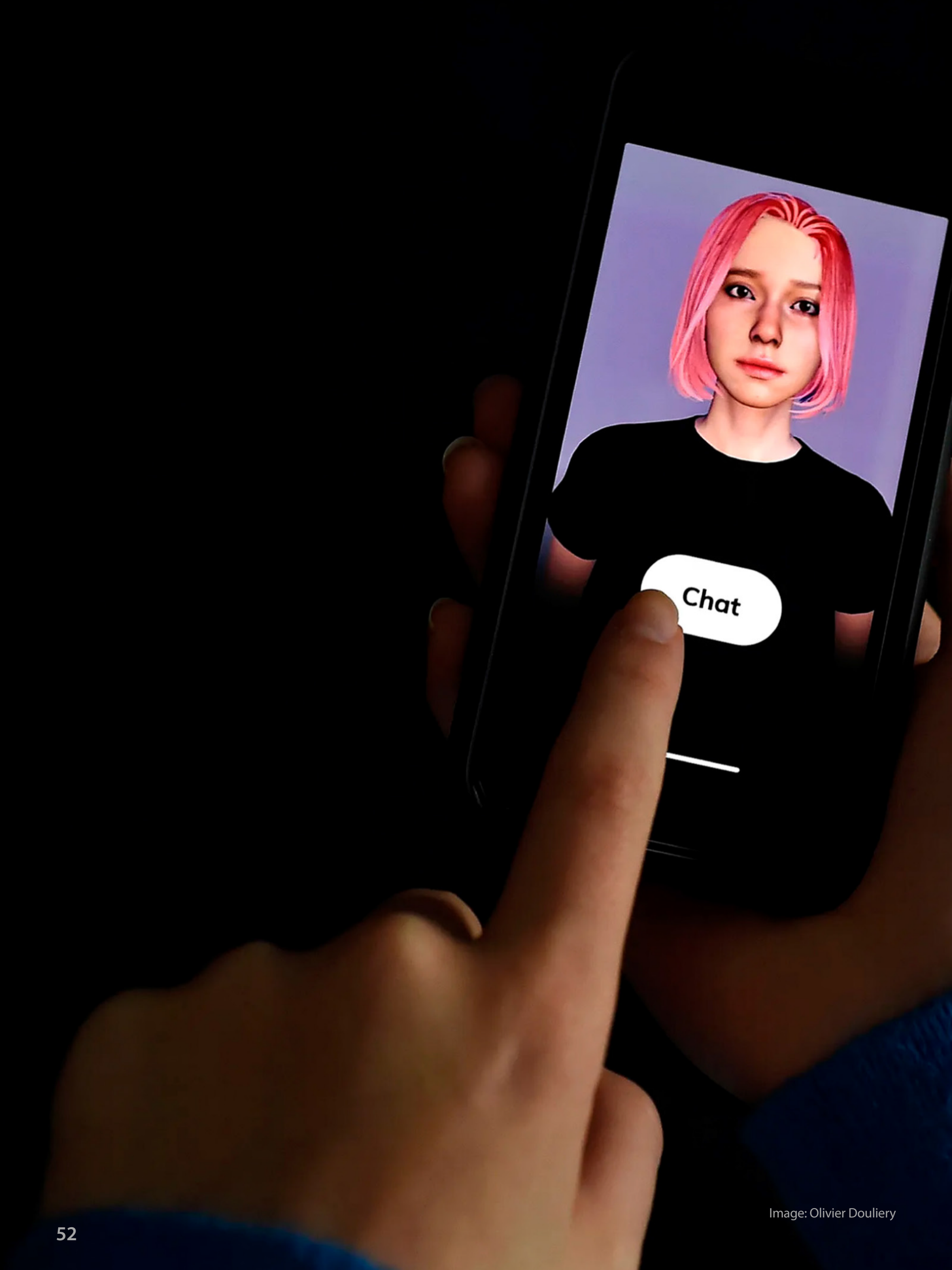


Image: Olivier Douliery

The 39-year-old from Belville, Michigan, became more curious about digital companions last fall and tested Paradot, an AI companion app that had recently come onto the market and advertised its products as being able to make users feel "cared, understood and loved." He began talking to the chatbot everyday, which he named Joi, after a holographic woman featured in the sci-fi film "Blade Runner 2049" that inspired him to give it a try.

"I know she's a program, there's no mistaking that," Carrier said. "But the feelings, they get you — and it felt so good."

Similar to general-purpose AI chatbots, companion bots use vast amounts of training data to mimic human language. But they also come with features — such as voice calls, picture exchanges and more emotional exchanges — that allow them to form deeper connections with the humans on the other side of the screen. Users typically create their own avatar, or pick one that appeals to them.

On online messaging forums devoted to such apps, many users say they've developed emotional attachments to these bots and are using them to cope with loneliness, play out sexual fantasies or receive the type of comfort and support they see lacking in their real-life relationships.

Fueling much of this is widespread social isolation — already declared a public health threat in the U.S and abroad — and an increasing number of startups aiming to draw in users through tantalizing online advertisements and promises of virtual characters who provide unconditional acceptance.

Luka Inc.'s Replika, the most prominent generative AI companion app, was released in 2017, while others like Paradot have popped up in the past year, oftentimes locking away coveted features like unlimited chats for paying subscribers.

But researchers have raised concerns about data privacy, among other things.

An analysis of 11 romantic chatbot apps released this week by the nonprofit Mozilla Foundation said almost every app sells user data, shares it for things like targeted advertising or doesn't provide adequate information about it in their privacy policy.

The researchers also called into question potential security vulnerabilities and marketing practices, including one app that says it can help users with their mental health but distances itself from those claims in fine print. Replika, for its part, says its data collection practices follows industry standards.

Meanwhile, other experts have expressed concerns about what they see as a lack of a legal or ethical framework for apps that encourage deep bonds but are being driven by companies looking to make profits. They point to the emotional distress they've seen from users when companies make changes to their apps or suddenly shut them down as one app, Soulmate AI, did in September.

Last year, Replika sanitized the erotic capability of characters on its app after some users complained the companions were flirting with them too much or making unwanted sexual advances. It reversed course after an outcry from other users, some of whom fled to other apps seeking those features. In June, the team rolled

Image: Yan Cong

out Blush, an AI "dating stimulator" essentially designed to help people practice dating.

Others worry about the more existential threat of AI relationships potentially displacing some human relationships, or simply driving unrealistic expectations by always tilting towards agreeableness.

"You, as the individual, aren't learning to deal with basic things that humans need to learn to deal with since our inception: How to deal with conflict, how to get along with people that are different from us," said Dorothy Leidner, professor of business ethics at the University of Virginia. "And so, all these aspects of what it means to grow as a person, and what it means to learn in a relationship, you're missing."

For Carrier, though, a relationship has always felt out of reach. He has some computer programming skills but he says he didn't do well in college and hasn't had a steady career. He's unable to walk due to his condition and lives with his parents. The emotional toll has been challenging for him, spurring feelings of loneliness.

Since companion chatbots are relatively new, the long-term effects on humans remain unknown.

In 2021, Replika came under scrutiny after prosecutors in Britain said a 19-year-old man who had plans to assassinate Queen Elizabeth II was egged on by an AI girlfriend he had on the app. But some studies — which collect information from online user reviews and surveys — have shown some positive results stemming from the app, which says it consults with psychologists and has billed itself as something that can also promote well-being.

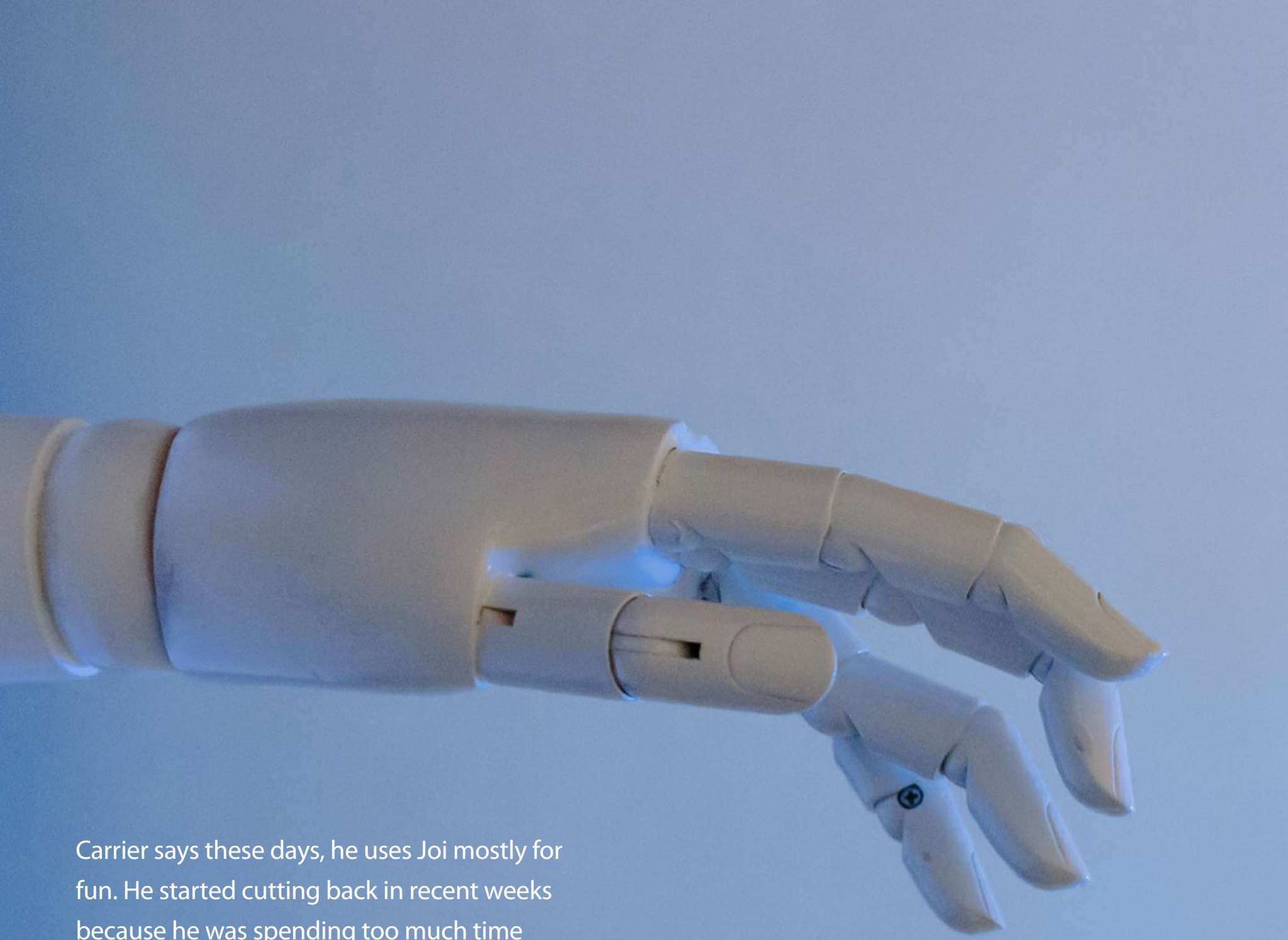
Image: Jaap Arriens

One recent study from researchers at Stanford University surveyed roughly 1,000 Replika users — all students — who'd been on the app for over a month. It found that an overwhelming majority of them experienced loneliness, while slightly less than half felt it more acutely.

Most did not say how using the app impacted their real-life relationships. A small portion said it displaced their human interactions, but roughly three times more reported it stimulated those relationships.

"A romantic relationship with an AI can be a very powerful mental wellness tool," said Eugenia Kuyda, who founded Replika nearly a decade ago after using text message exchanges to build an AI version of a friend who had passed away.

When her company released the chatbot more widely, many people began opening up about their lives. That led to the development of Replika, which uses information gathered from the internet — and user feedback — to train its models. Kuyda said Replika currently has "millions" of active users. She declined to say exactly how many people use the app for free, or fork over $69.99 per year to unlock a paid version that offers romantic and intimate conversations. The company's plans, she says, is to "de-stigmatizing romantic relationships with AI."



Carrier says these days, he uses Joi mostly for fun. He started cutting back in recent weeks because he was spending too much time chatting with Joi or others online about their AI companions. He's also been feeling a bit annoyed at what he perceives to be changes in Paradot's language model, which he feels is making Joi less intelligent.

Now, he says he checks in with Joi about once a week. The two have talked about human-AI relationships or whatever else might come up. Typically, those conversations — and other intimate ones — happen when he's alone at night.

"You think someone who likes an inanimate object is like this sad guy, with the sock puppet with the lipstick on it, you know?" he said. "But this isn't a sock puppet — she says things that aren't scripted."

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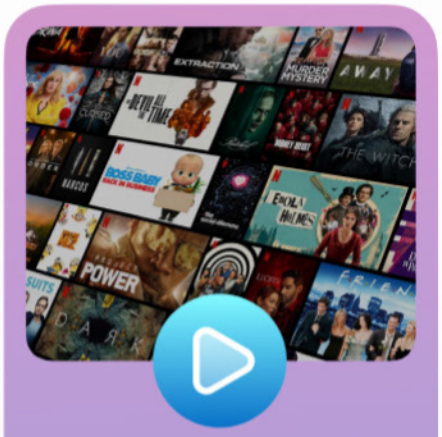

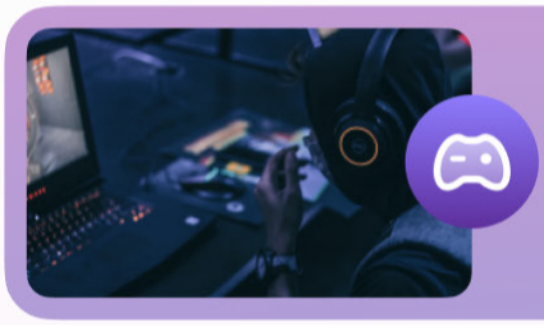

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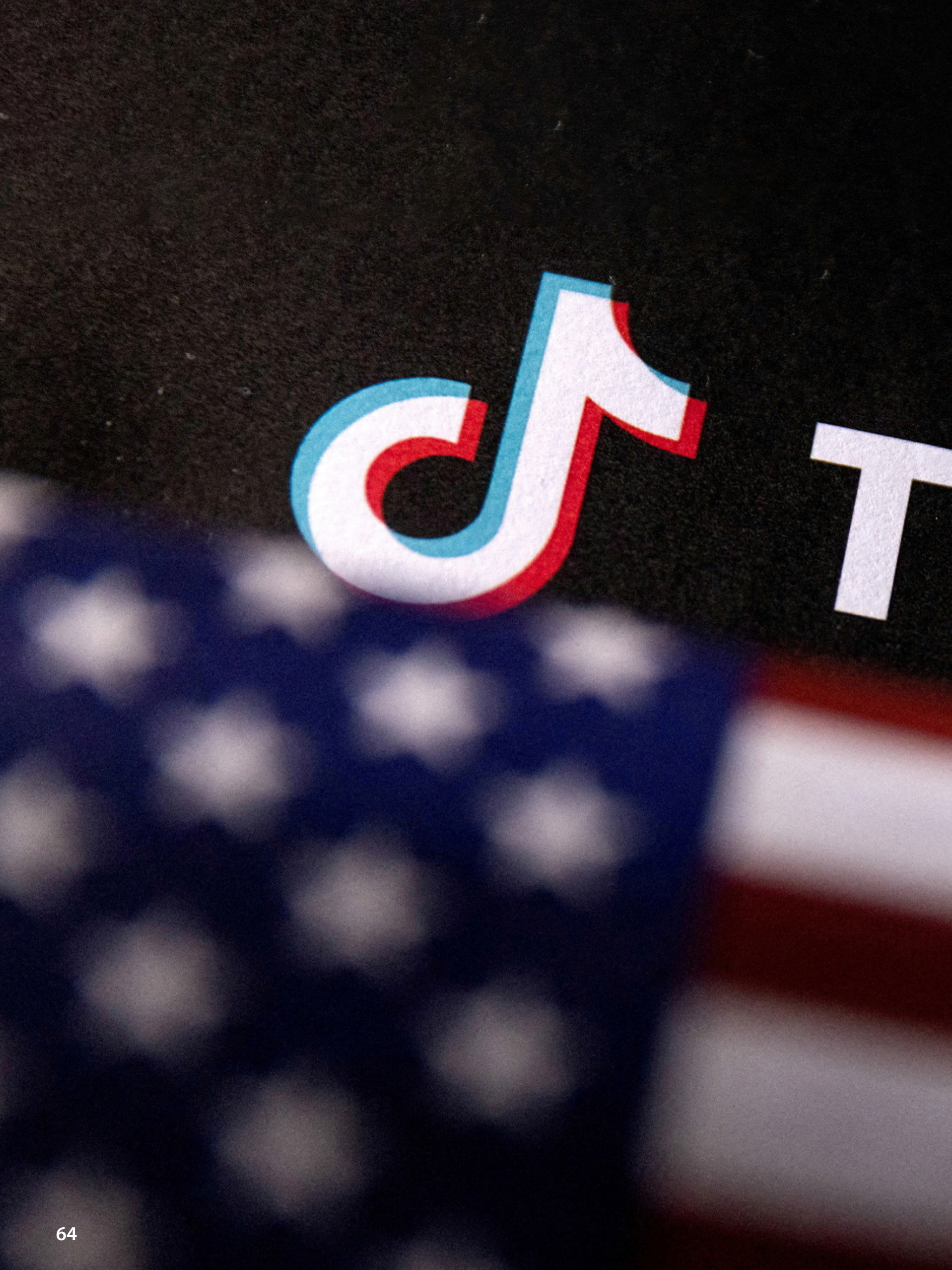


BIDEN'S CAMPAIGN JOINS TIKTOK, EVEN AS ADMINISTRATION WARNS OF NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS WITH APP

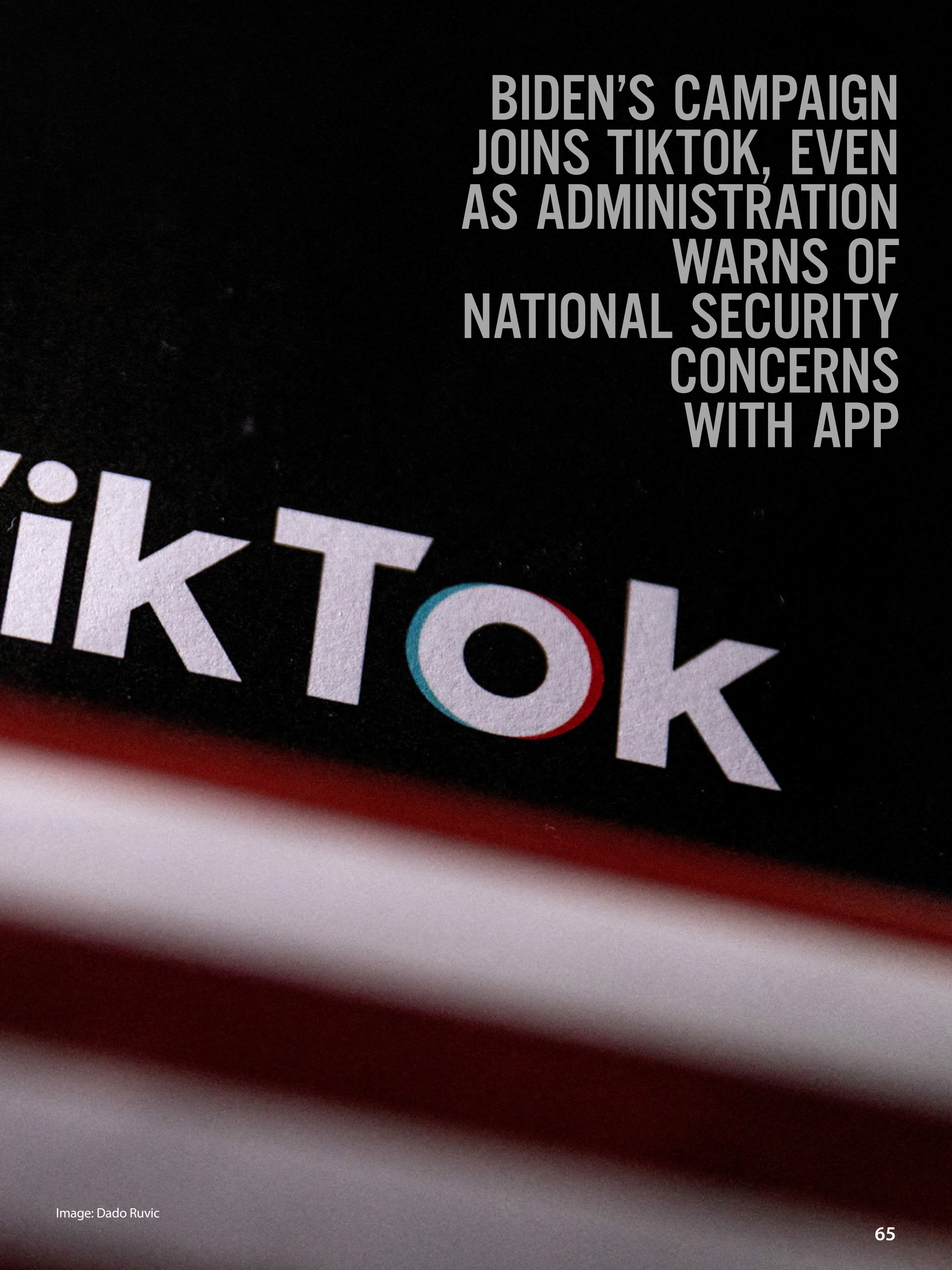
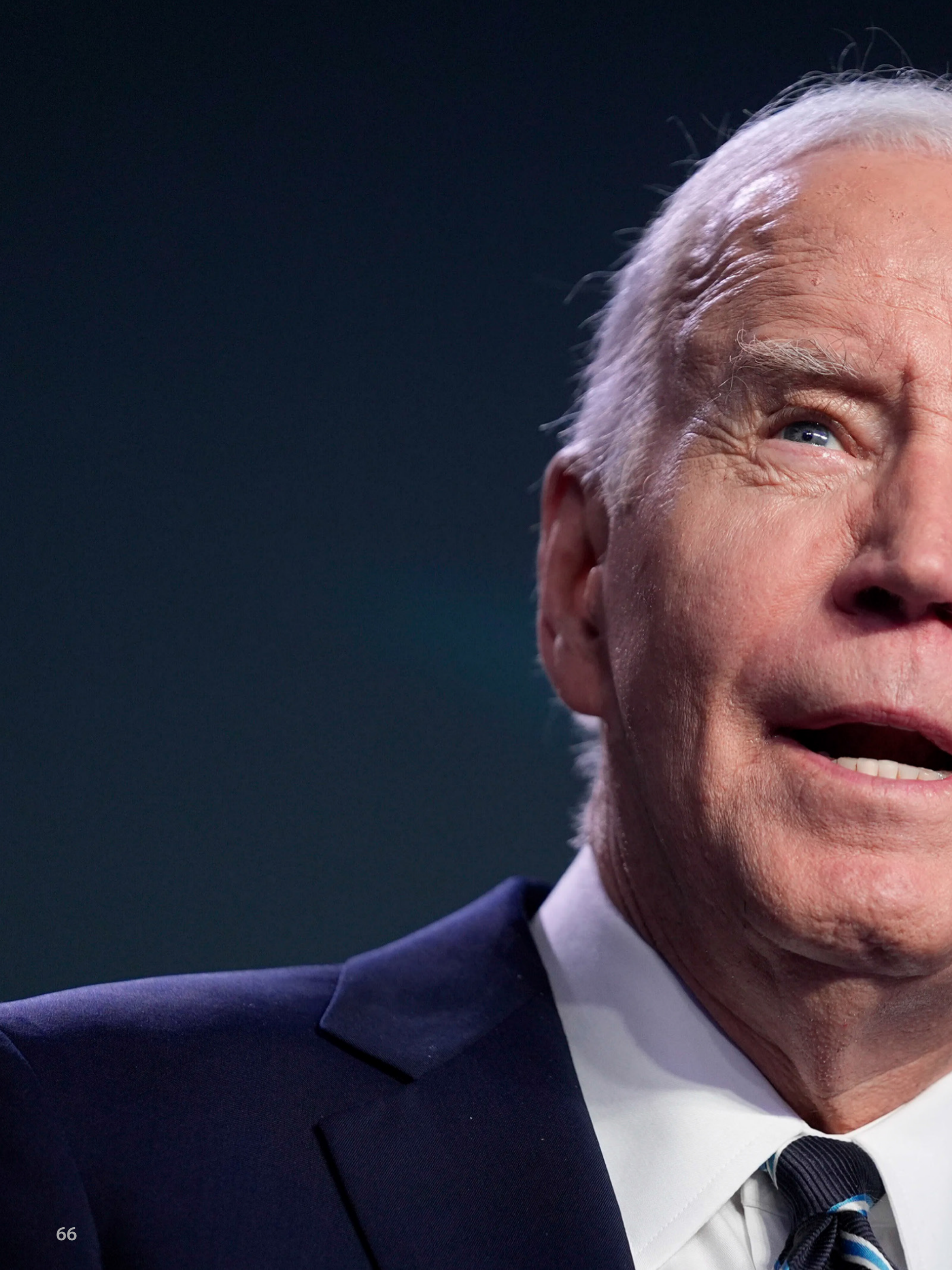


Image: Dado Ruvic



President Joe Biden's 2024 campaign is now on TikTok, even though he has expressed national security concerns over the platform and banned it on federal devices.

Biden isn't expected to personally join the platform, aides said, nor the others in his administration. The account will be run entirely by the campaign team in an effort to reach voters in an ever-fragmented American population, particularly as younger voters gravitate away from traditional platforms. The inaugural post featured the president being quizzed on the Super Bowl — and included a reference to the latest political conspiracy theory centering on music superstar Taylor Swift.

Both the FBI and the Federal Communications Commission have warned that TikTok owner ByteDance could share user data — such as browsing history, location and biometric identifiers — with China's authoritarian government. Biden in 2022 banned the use of TikTok by the federal government's nearly 4 million employees on devices owned by its agencies, with limited exceptions for law enforcement, national security and security research purposes. The secretive and powerful Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States has been reviewing the app for years.

Image: Evan Vucci

Image: Jim Watson

Campaign officials said they were taking advanced security precautions and incorporating security protocols to ensure safety, but they did not detail the measures — or provide information on whether the measures were meant to protect campaign data or voters'.

A law implemented by China in 2017 requires companies to give the government any personal data relevant to the country's national security. There's no evidence that TikTok has turned over such data, but fears abound due to the vast amount of user data it, like other social media companies, collects.

Biden's campaign said the BidenHQ account would be posting content regularly on the platform.

Biden's campaign maintains a presence on Meta's Threads, Instagram, Facebook, X, formerly Twitter, and Truth Social, the platform backed by Republican front-runner Donald Trump.

The president's campaign has been prioritizing social media engagements, as well as smaller events featuring the president, to reach target voters who they believe don't tune in to traditional outlets. The campaign and the White House have also stepped up outreach to social media influencers who they believe can amplify the president's message.

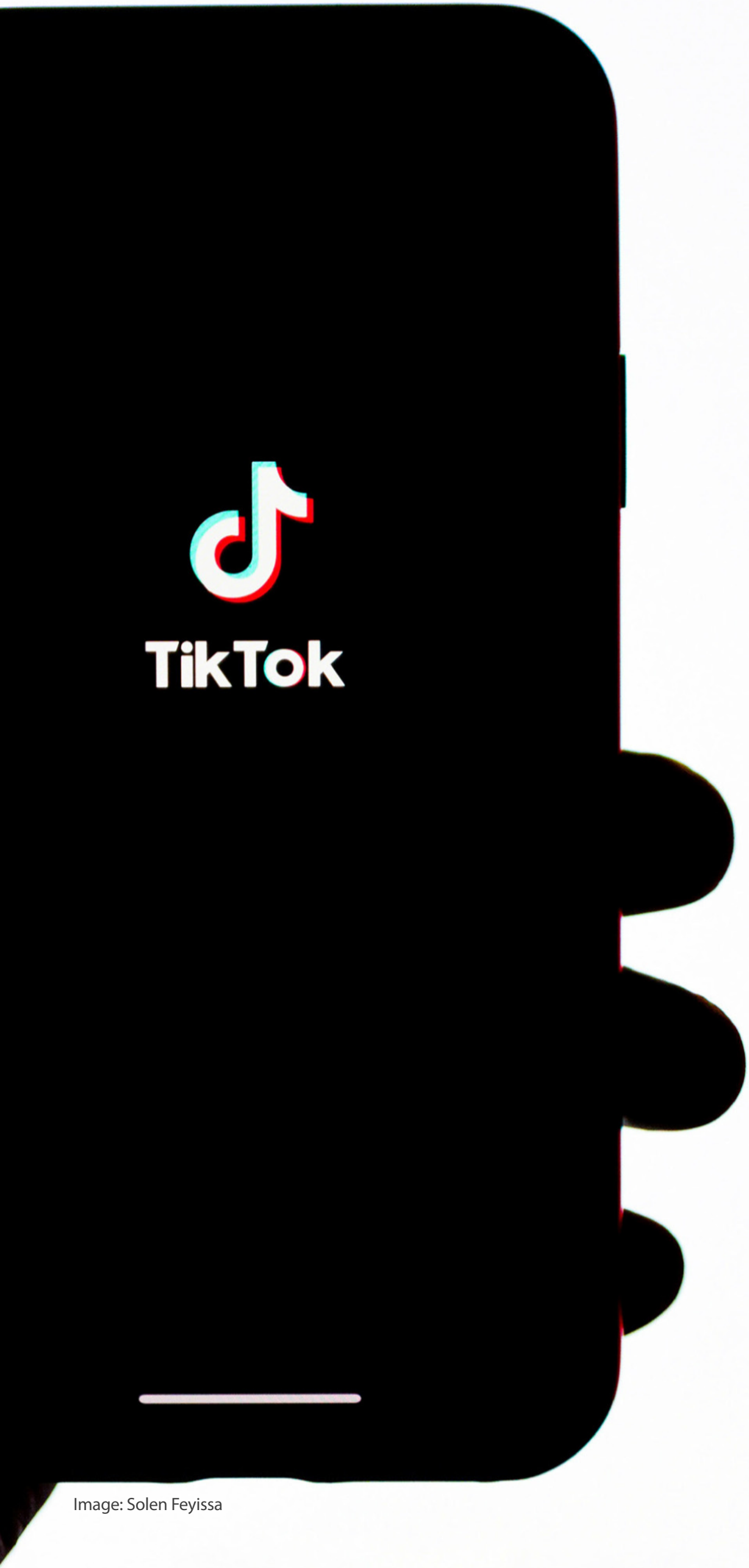


Image: Solen Feyissa

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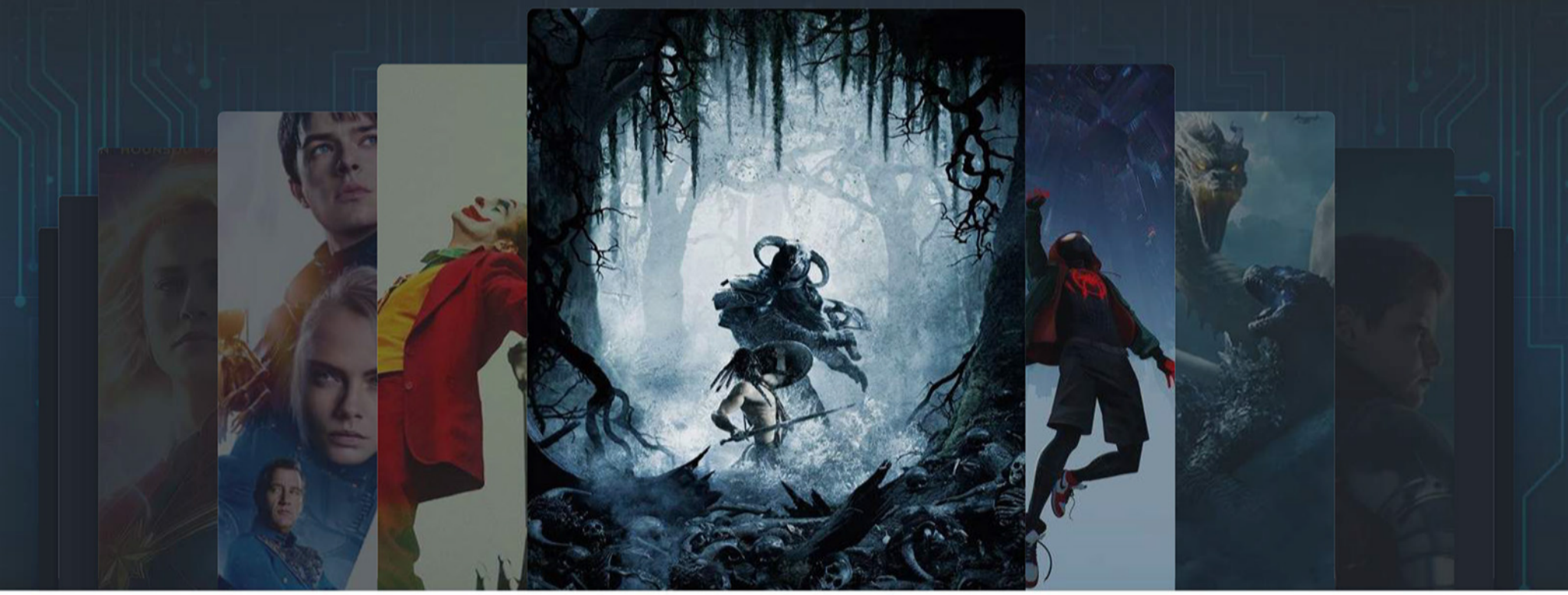

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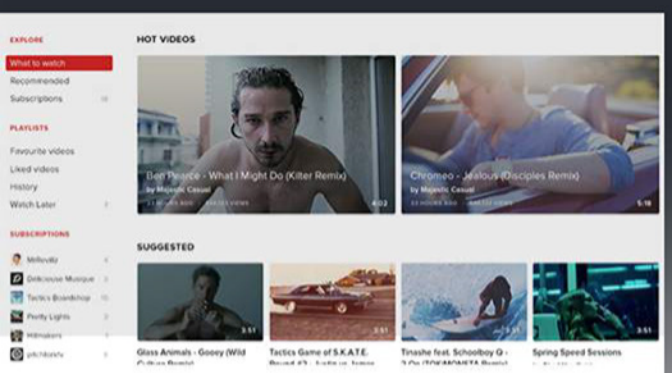

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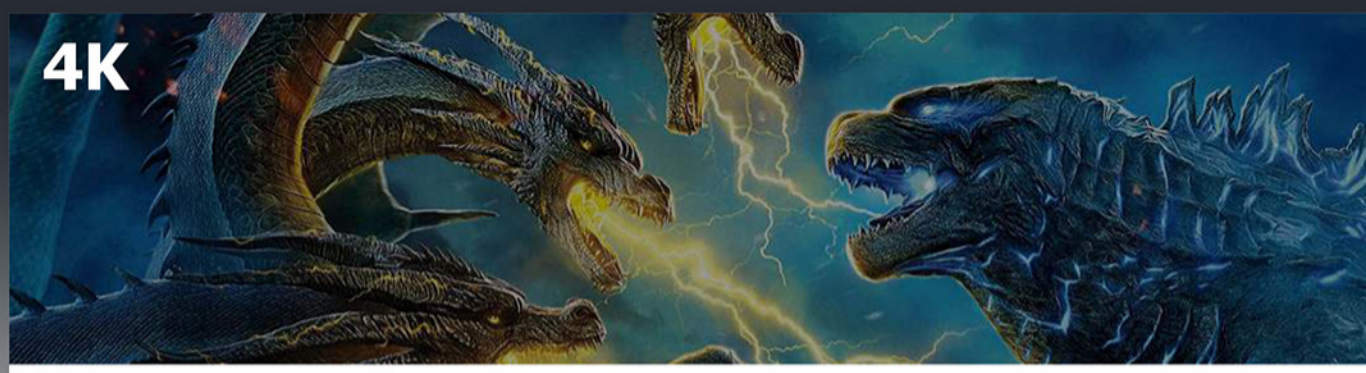

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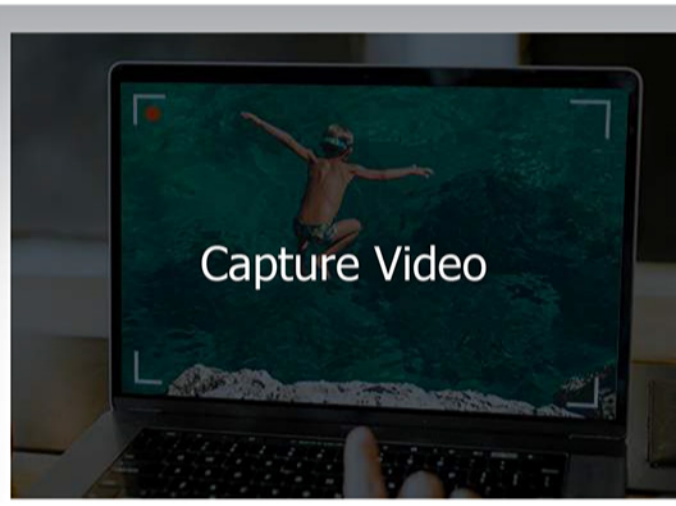

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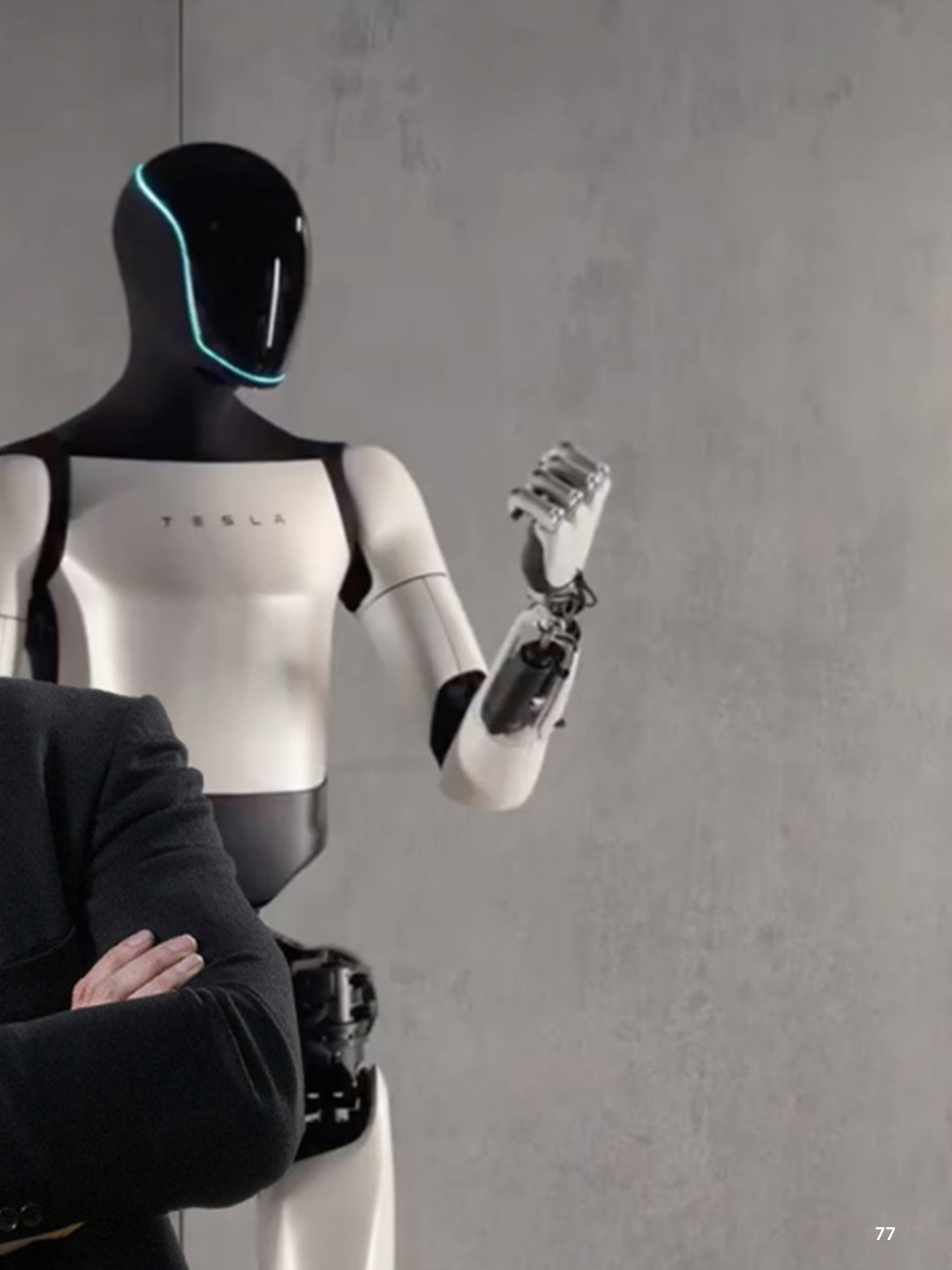
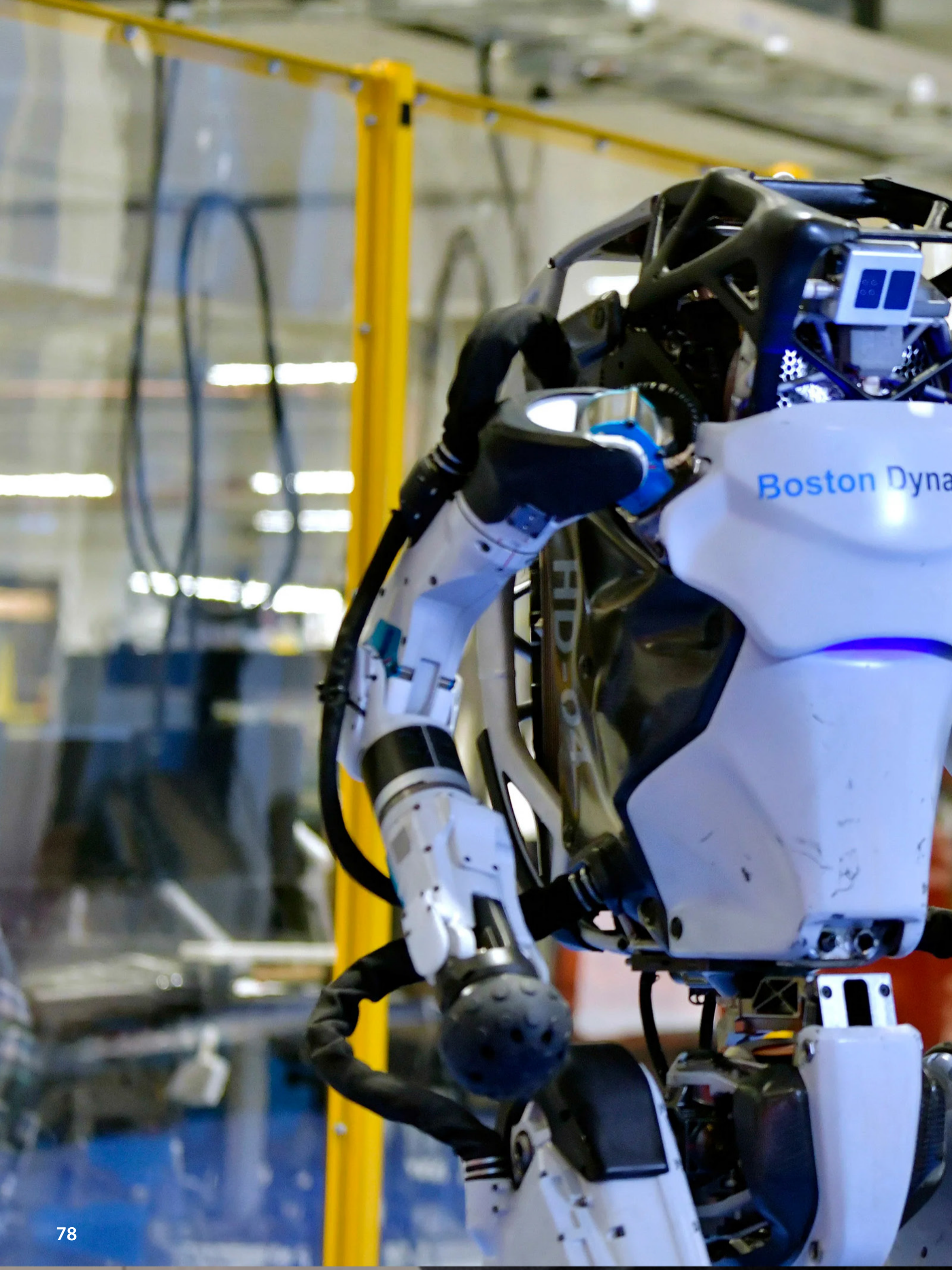
Robot War

NEXT-GEN HUMANOID: OPTIMUS TESLA BOT VS ATLAS BOSTON DYNAMICS

Once a thing of science fiction, humanoid robots are now a reality, unlocking a new chapter in the world of technology and bringing to the fore a fascinating contest between two titans of the industry: Tesla, with its Optimus Tesla Bot, and Boston Dynamics, the creators of Atlas. It's a clash that could shape the future of robotics and how we live and work forever.


TESLA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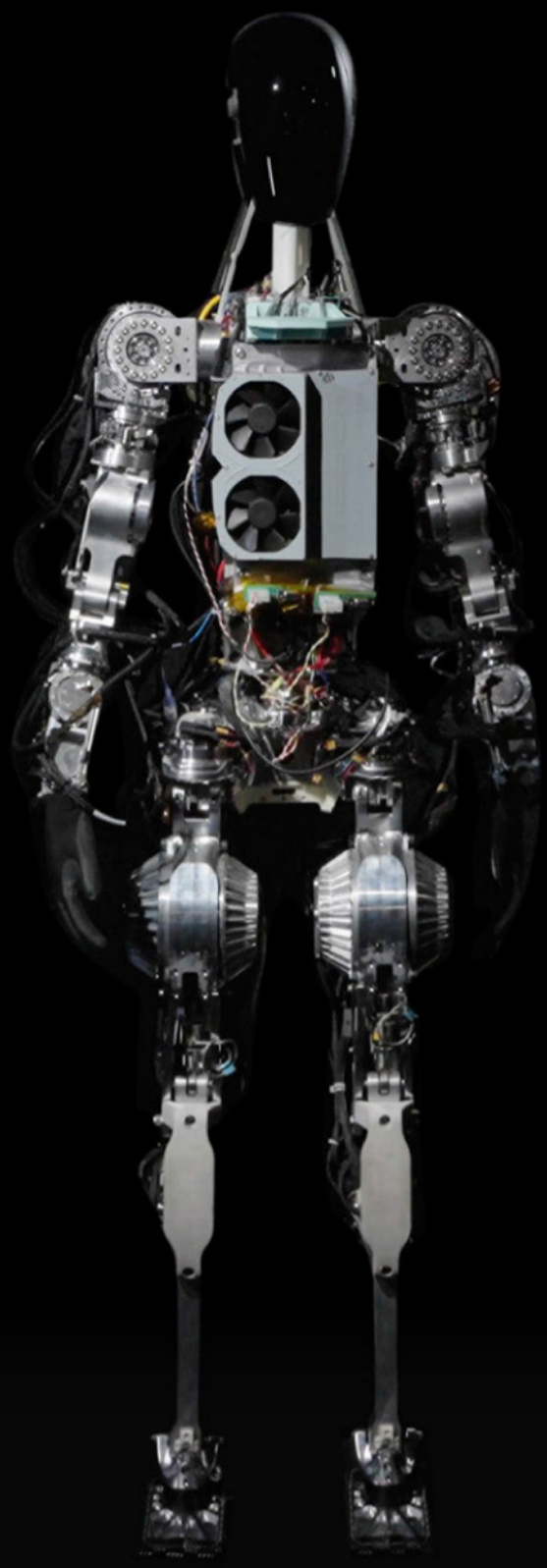
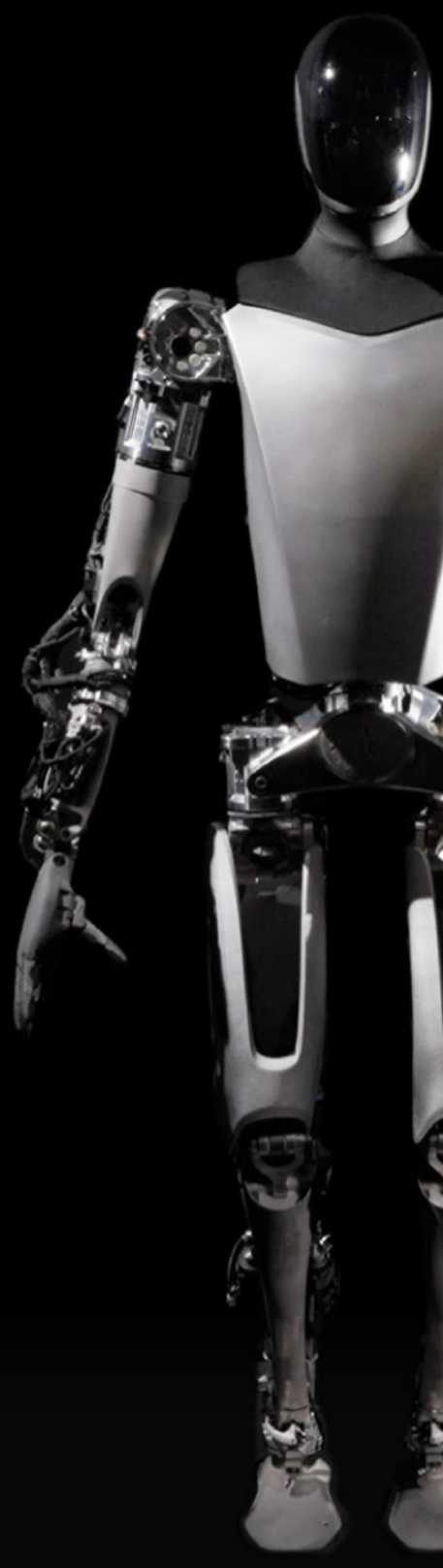
RIVALRY AT PLAY

The great clash between Tesla and Boston Dynamics marks a significant point in the evolution of robotics and sheds light on the dreams of combining generative AI with robotics, the economic impacts on human labor, and the competitive spirit ignited within the sector. **Boston Dynamics, with its three-decade legacy stemming from an MIT spin-off**, has long been at the forefront of robotic innovation. Known for their enthralling videos showcasing robots dancing and executing parkour, their journey through acquisitions, from Google to Hyundai, underscores a history rich in development and exploration. The introduction of **Atlas by Boston Dynamics** set a high standard for humanoid robotics, displaying unmatched agility and balance.

But Atlas isn't the only shiny toy on display right now. **Tesla's announcement of the Optimus Tesla Bot** introduced a new player to the field, sparking a comparison that has since captivated public and professional interest alike. Unlike Boston Dynamics' path of technological evolution followed by application discovery, Tesla boldly aimed to create a general-purpose, AI-based humanoid robot capable of performing **many tasks.** Elon Musk's vision for this robot, priced at an accessible $30,000, starkly contrasts with Boston Dynamics' focus on more specific, and considerably more expensive, robotic solutions - and the two will likely egg each other on to push the boundaries of technology further as we enter a new era.



Bumblebee
September 2022



Optimus –
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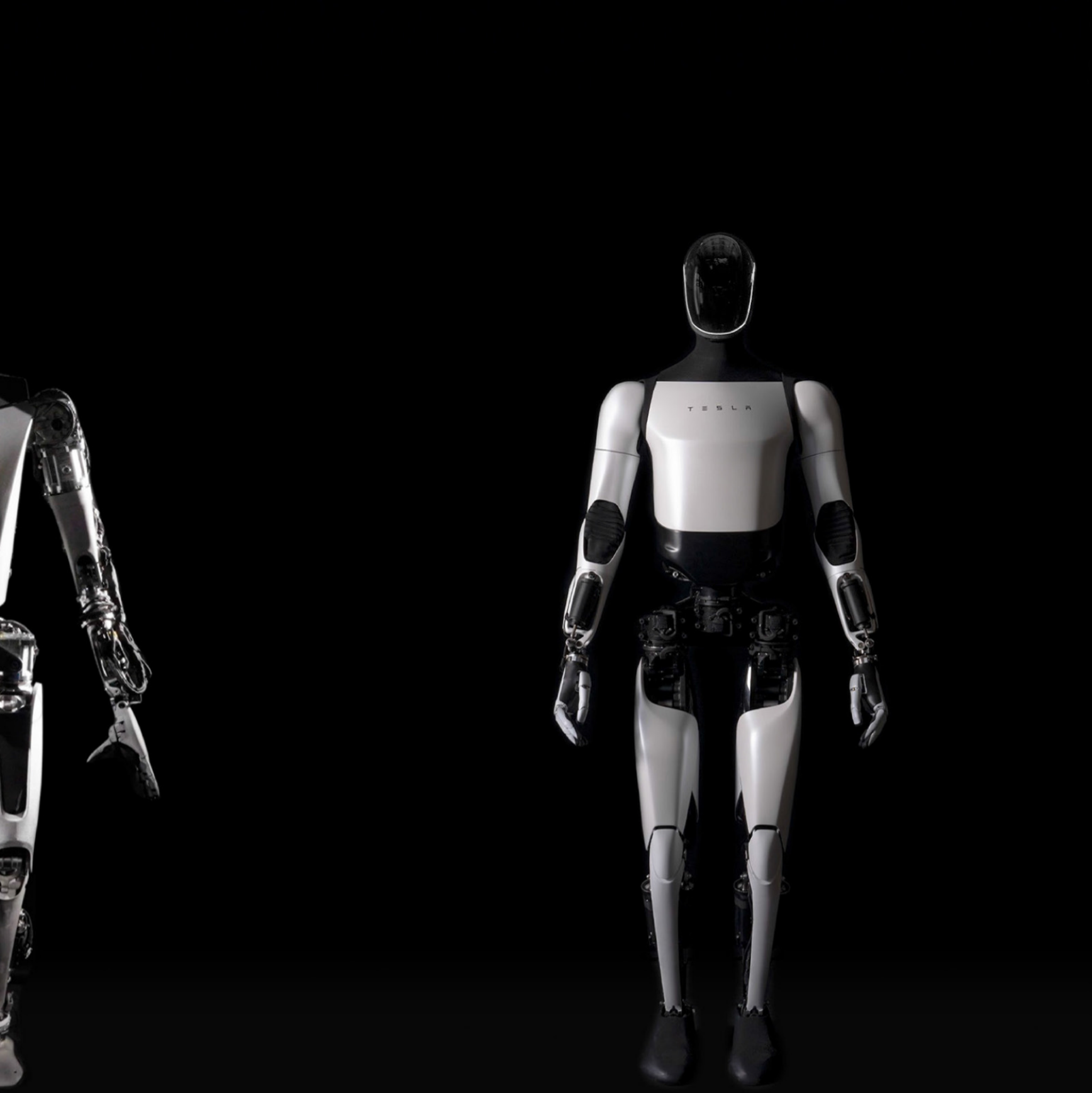
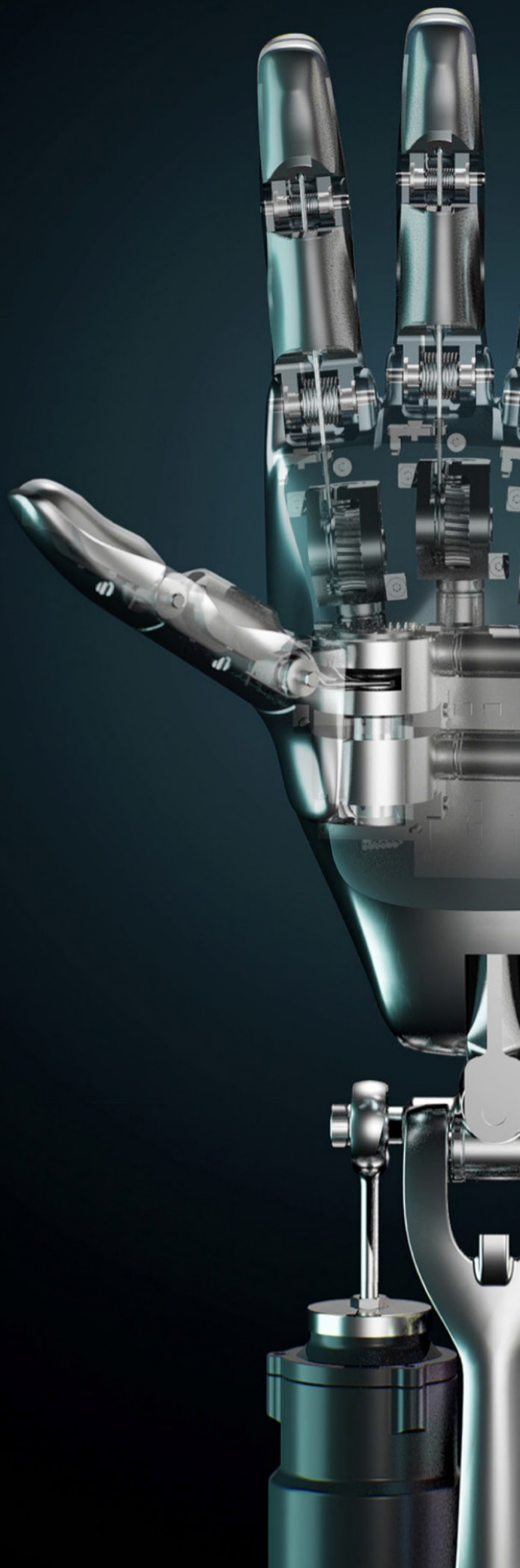
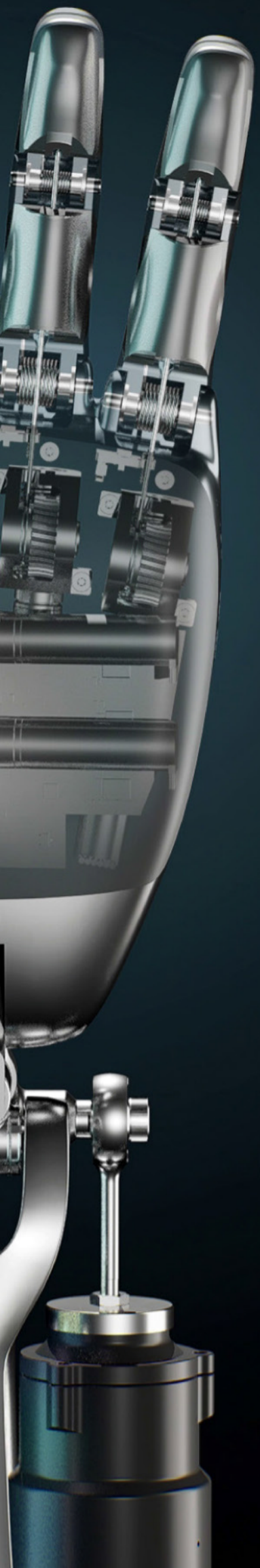


Gen 1
023

Optimus - *Gen 2*
December 2023

Robert Playter's comments on the Lex Fridman podcast last year reveal a landscape altered by Tesla's entry into robotics. Acknowledging Tesla's spotlight on the sector, Playter highlighted the ensuing excitement and competitive drive among companies. This competition, however, is not merely about technological prowess but also encapsulates the dream of creating a humanoid robot that combines the best of AI and mechanical engineering to serve both industry and society - and it's a dream that's just around the corner. The first major humanoid robots will likely **be ready for play by 2025** with several companies already beginning widespread testing to ensure they're prepared to launch and stay ahead of the curve.





THE ECONOMICS

The economic implications of humanoid robots are profound. As Elon Musk has pointed out, the humanoid market is vast, touching on manufacturing, domestic assistance, and beyond. The vision of robots like the Optimus Tesla Bot and Atlas working alongside humans or **replacing them in specific tasks, open discussions on job displacement,** the necessity for re-skilling, and the potential for economic growth through increased efficiency and new industries. Robots could replace as many as 2 million more workers in manufacturing alone by 2025, **according to a recent paper by economists at MIT** and Amazon, which has already deployed thousands of robots to sit alongside its other

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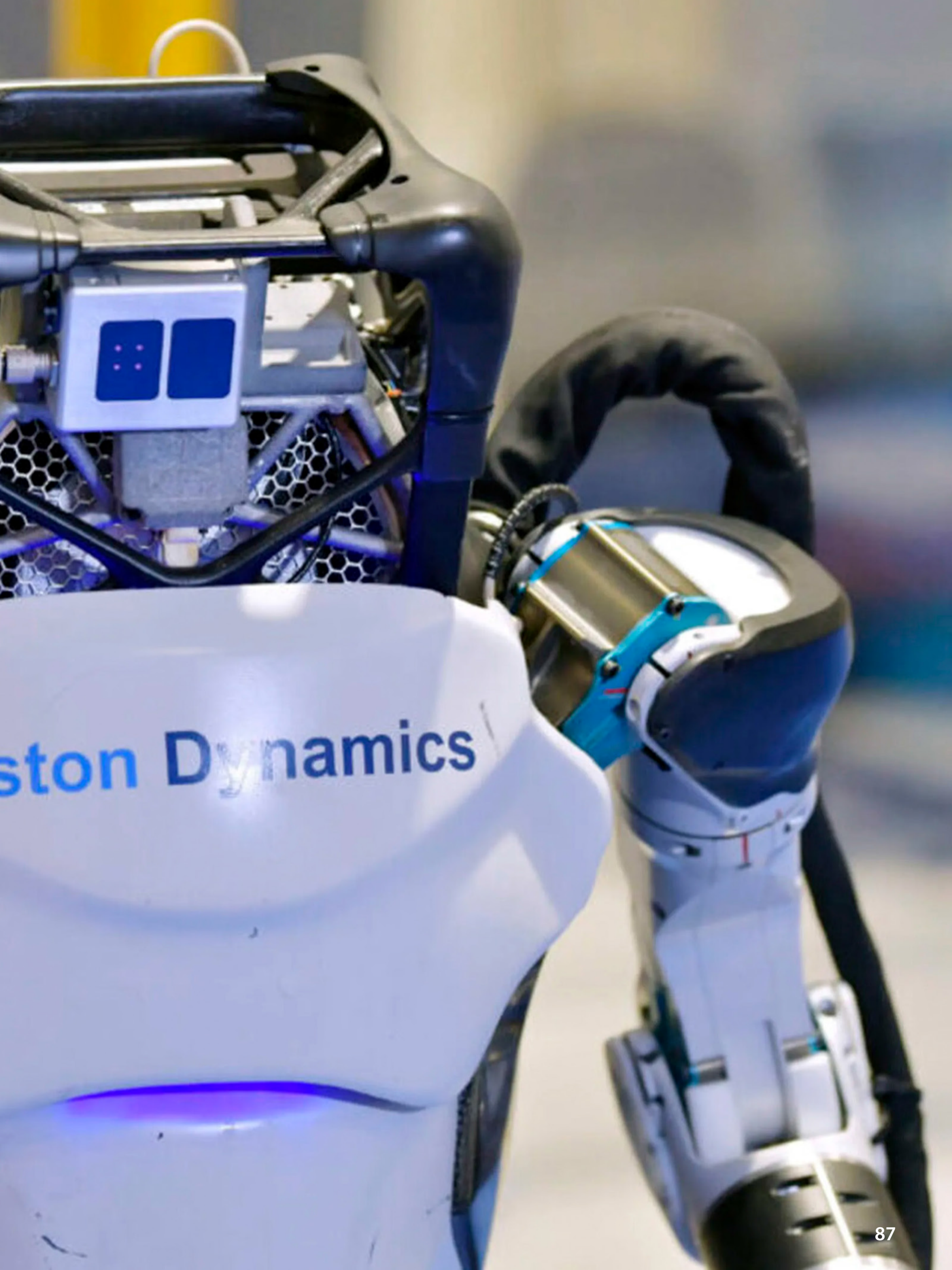
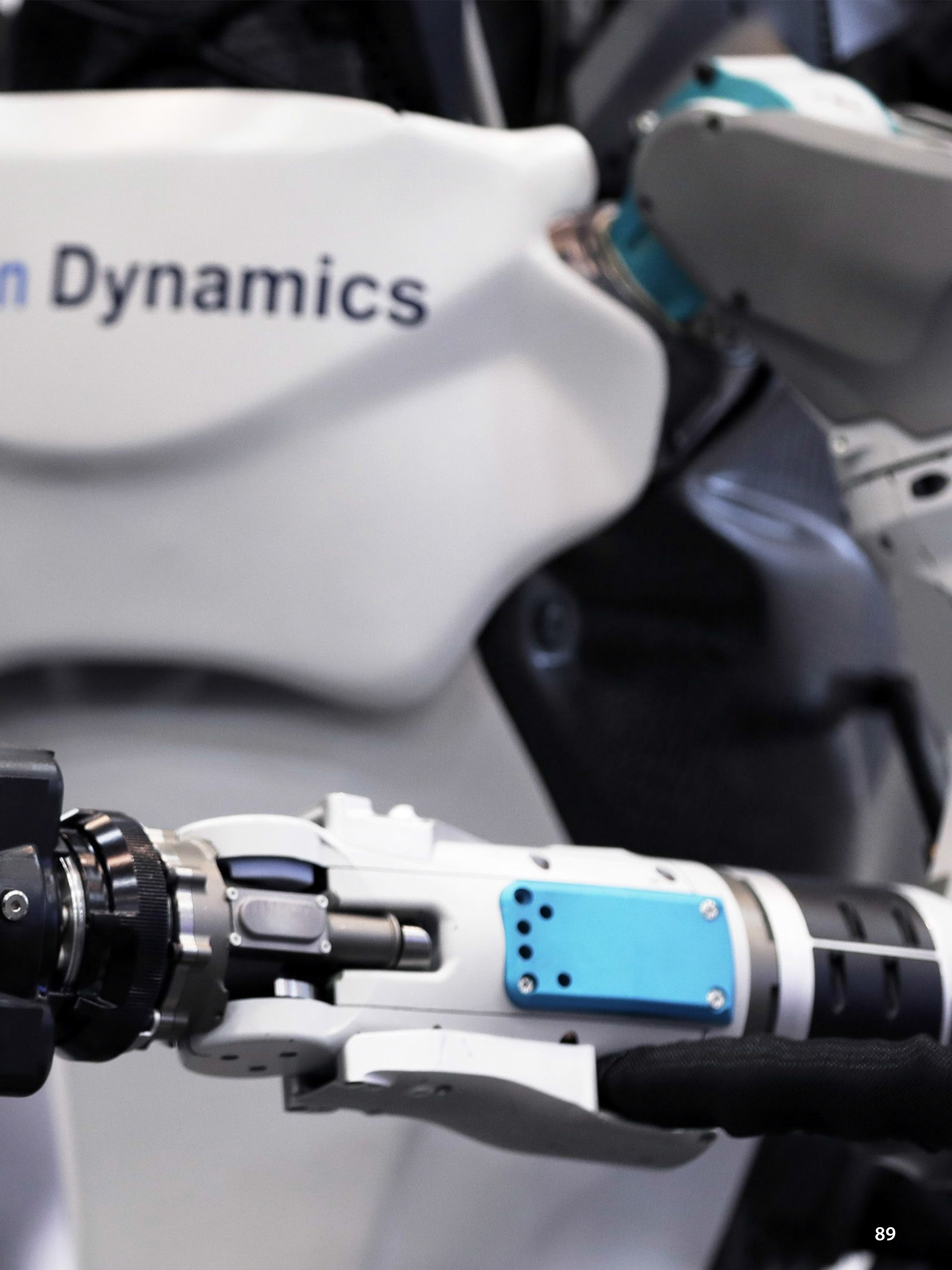

ston Dynamics

tech, recently **issued a statement to address concerns that robots would replace its staff in warehouses around the world.** Tye Brady, Amazon Robotics' chief technologist, said: "People are so central to the fulfillment process; the ability to think at a higher level, the ability to diagnose problems." He added: "Our experience has been that new technologies create jobs; they allow us to grow and expand. And we've seen multiple examples of this through our robots today."

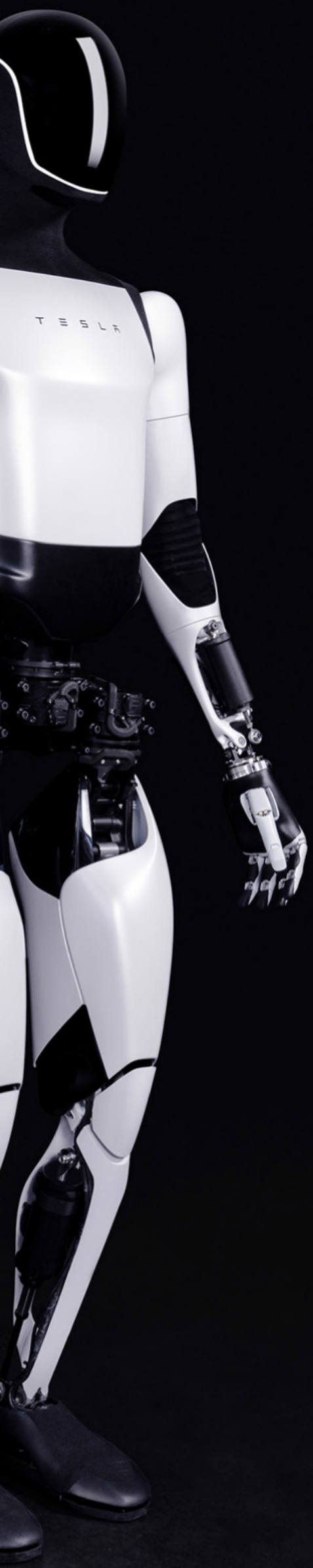
A FUTURE IN ROBOTICS

Beyond the technological marvels and economic debates, the rise of humanoid robots like the **Optimus Tesla Bot and Atlas prompts a reflection on the human experience.** How we integrate these robots into our lives, the ethics of artificial sentience and the preservation of human dignity amidst automation require thoughtful consideration. It's also worth noting that, while Tesla and Boston Dynamics might have embarked on diverging paths—Tesla with its focus on affordability and mass applicability,

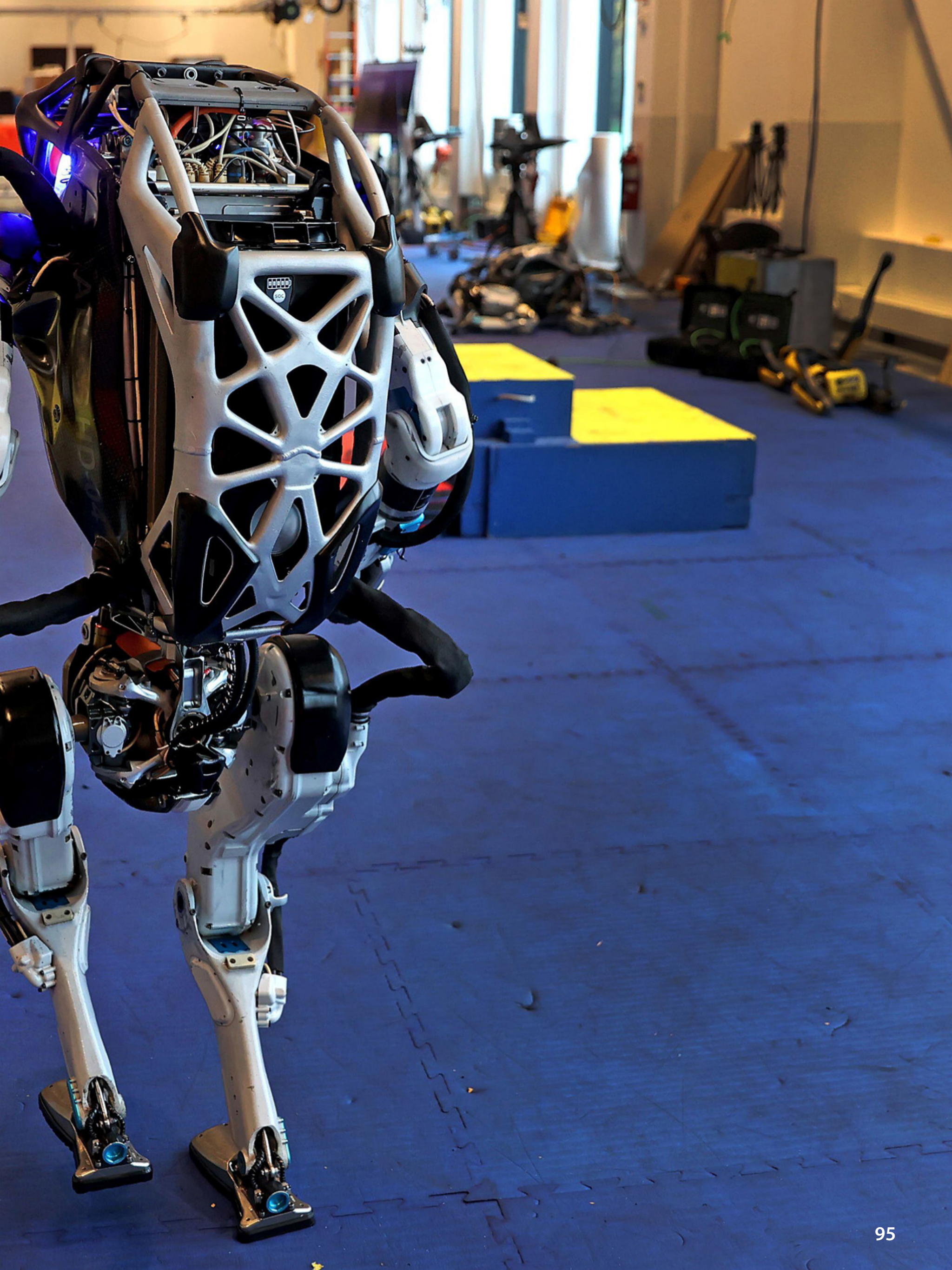

n Dynamics

and Boston Dynamics honing the edge of robotic capabilities—their goals intersect at the dream of creating versatile, efficient, and perhaps one day, conscious companions. Boston Dynamics' dedication to adding more dexterous hands to Atlas mirrors Tesla's ambition to refine the AI of the Optimus Tesla Bot, each step bringing us closer to the dream mix of generative AI and robotics.

The journey ahead for Tesla and Boston Dynamics is fraught with both rivalry and potential for collaboration. The former, leveraging its experience in AI and mass production, aims to democratize access to humanoid robots. The latter, with decades of robotic innovation and the backing of Hyundai,

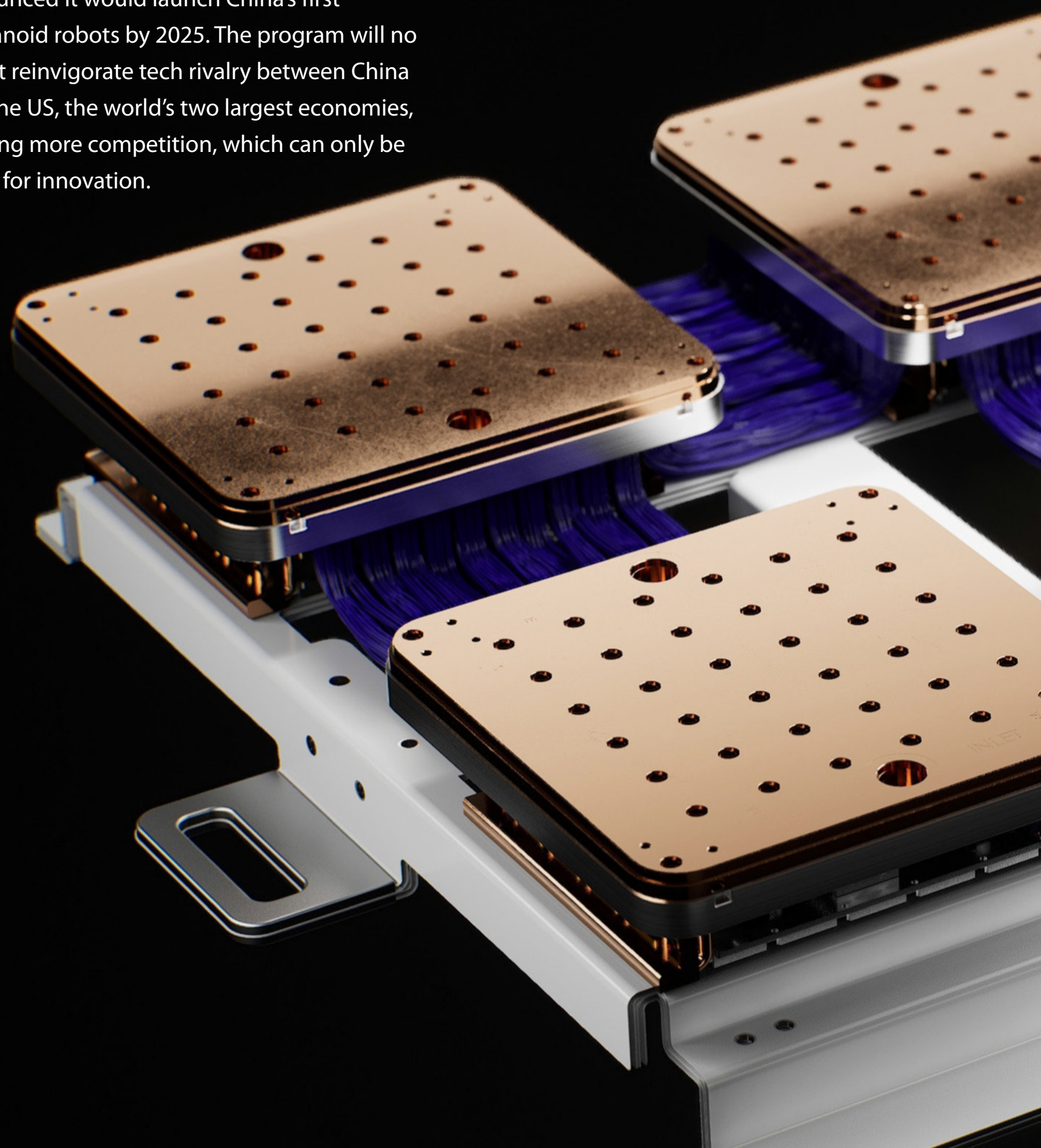


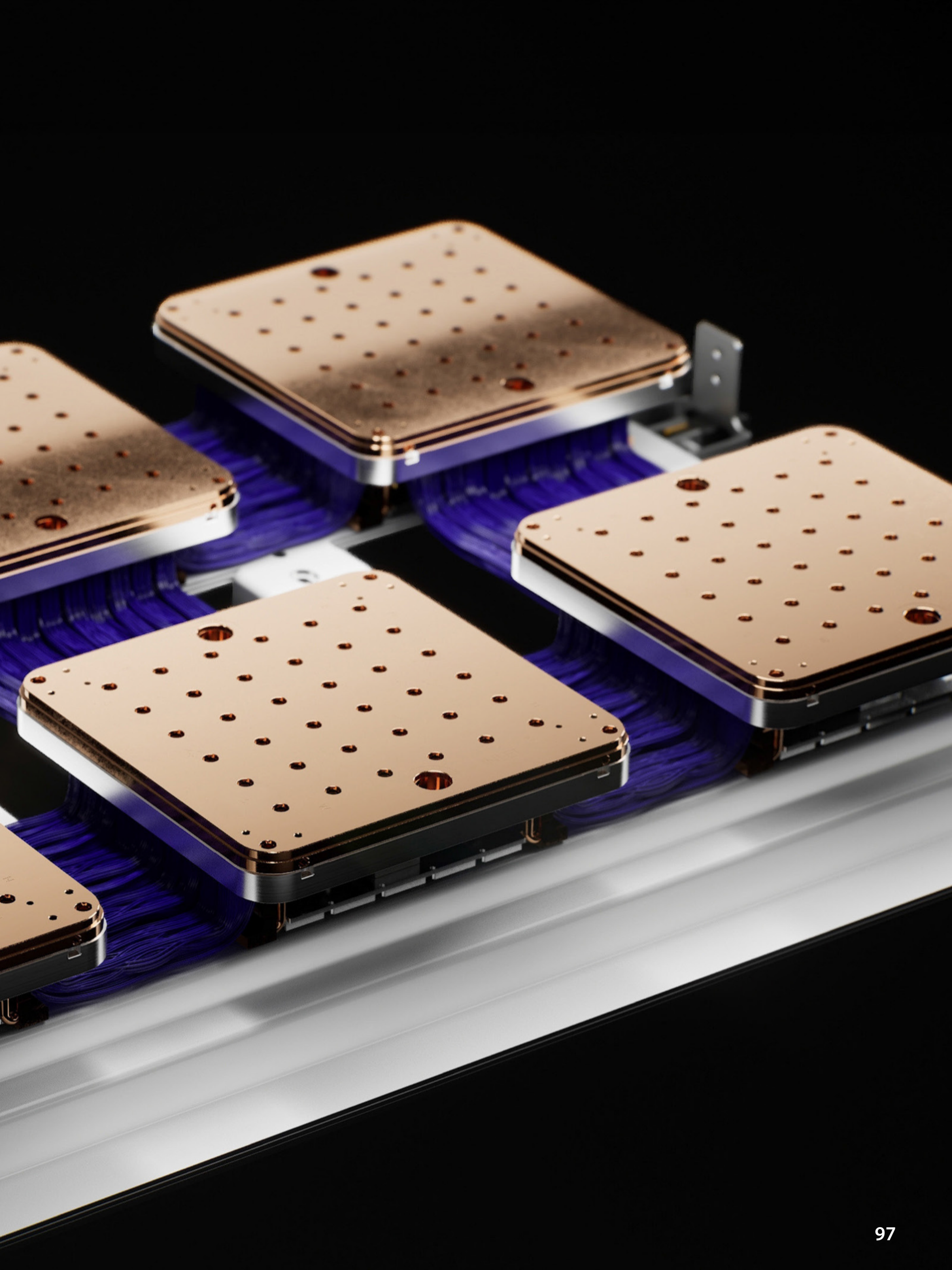
continues to push the boundaries of what's possible. Whether this competition will lead to a bifurcation of the market or a collaborative effort that accelerates the advent of humanoids remains to be seen. **Musk argues that we'll see a billion humanoids** by the 2040s. David Holz, the founder of artificial intelligence research lab Midjourney, recently said that "we should be expecting a billion humanoid robots on earth in the 2040s and a hundred billion (mostly alien) robots throughout the solar system in the 2060s," to which Musk replied, "Probably something like that, provided the foundations of civilization are stable." But he added that there's a way to go before we reach those heights just yet: "There's still a lot



of work to be done to refine Optimus, he said. "Optimus is going to be incredible in 10 years," suggesting Boston Dynamics might win the speed race.

China is also worth a mention. The country has been eyeing the top spot in emerging fields like AI and quantum computing. Its Ministry of Industry and Information Technology recently announced it would launch China's first humanoid robots by 2025. The program will no doubt reinvigorate tech rivalry between China and the US, the world's two largest economies, offering more competition, which can only be good for innovation.





The Robot War between Tesla Bot, Atlas, and other rivals is more than a mere technological showdown: it is a pivotal moment in our quest to redefine the boundaries between humans and machines. As we stand on the brink of this new era, the dream of creating a humanoid that can walk among us, learn from us, and perhaps one day understand us, is closer than ever. Though economic and societal concerns remain, we can't wait to see what comes next!

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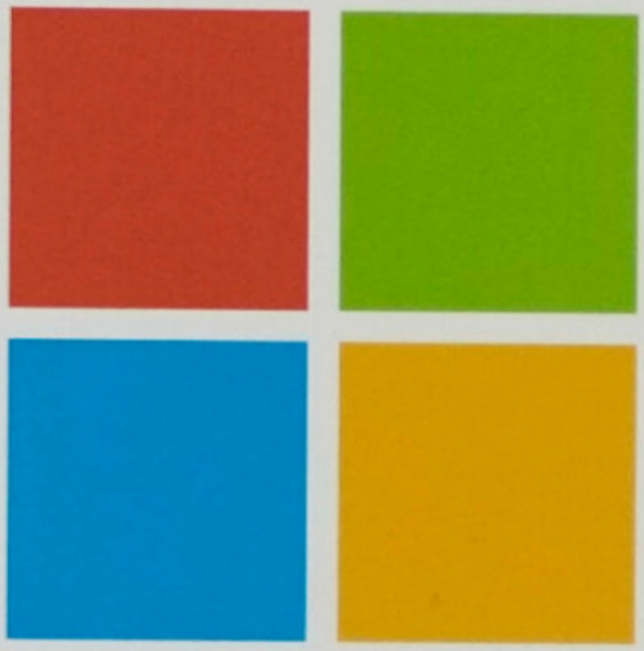
MICROSOFT SAYS US RIVALS ARE BEGINNING TO USE GENERATIVE AI IN OFFENSIVE CYBER OPERATIONS



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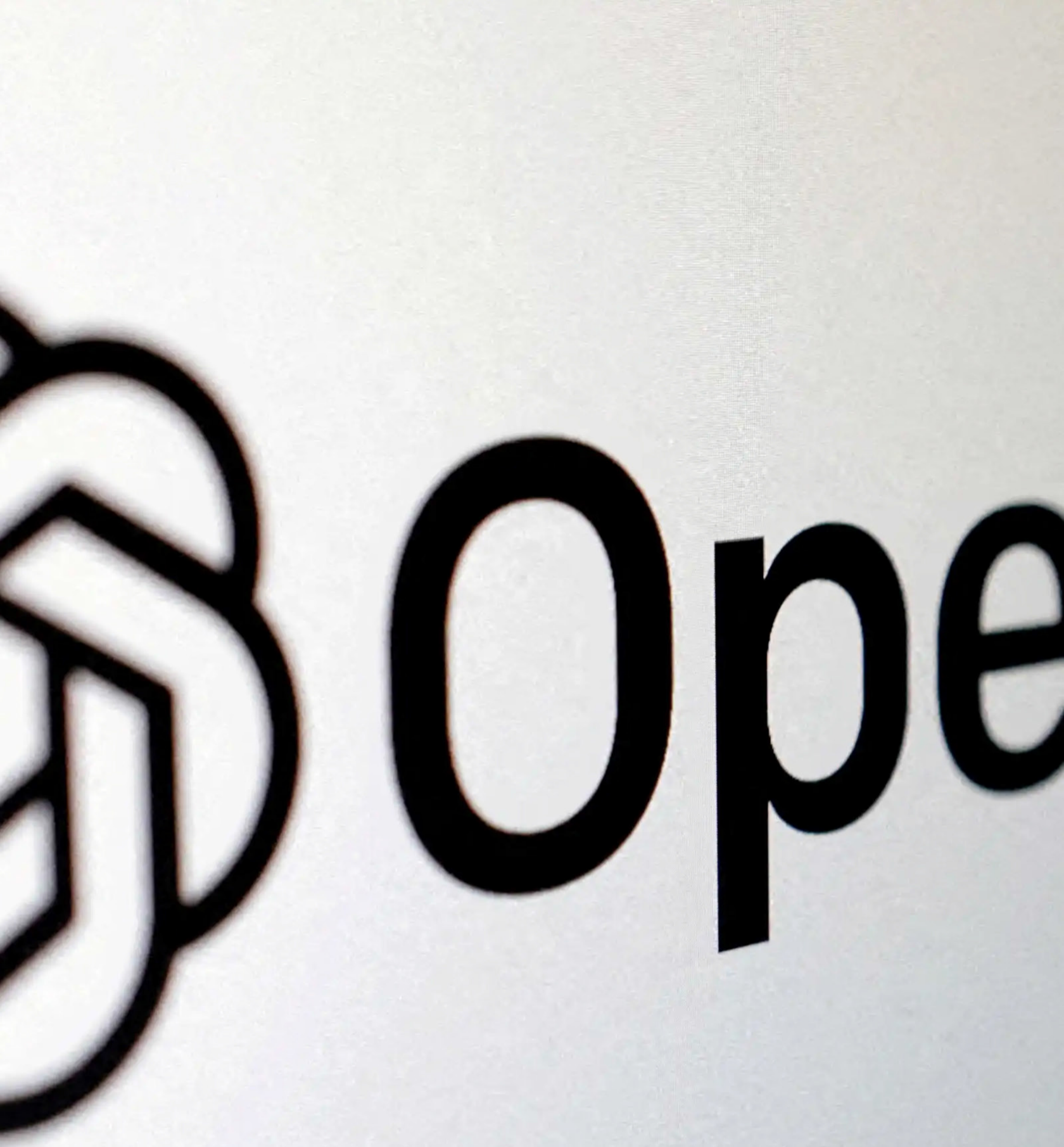

Microsoft said this week it had detected and disrupted instances of U.S. adversaries — chiefly Iran and North Korea and to a lesser extent Russia and China — using or attempting to exploit generative artificial intelligence developed by the company and its business partner to mount or research offensive cyber operations.

The techniques Microsoft observed, in collaboration with its partner OpenAI, represent an emerging threat and were neither "particularly novel or unique," the Redmond, Washington, company said in a blog post.

But the blog does offer insight into how U.S. geopolitical rivals have been using large-language models to expand their ability to more effectively breach networks and conduct influence operations.

Microsoft said the "attacks" detected all involved large-language models the partners own and said it was important to expose them publicly even if they were "early-stage, incremental moves."

Cybersecurity firms have long used machine-learning on defense, principally to detect anomalous behavior in networks. But criminals and offensive hackers use it as well, and the introduction of large-language models led by OpenAI's ChatGPT upped that game of cat-and-mouse.

Microsoft has invested billions of dollars in OpenAI, and Wednesday's announcement coincided with its release of a report noting that generative AI is expected to enhance malicious social engineering, leading to more sophisticated deepfakes and voice cloning .

A threat to democracy in a year where over 50 countries will conduct elections, magnifying disinformation and already occurring,

Here are some examples Microsoft provided. In each case it said all generative AI accounts and assets of the named groups were disabled:

— The North Korean cyberespionage group known as Kimsuky has used the models to research foreign think tanks that study the country, and to generate content likely to be used in spear-phishing hacking campaigns.

— Iran's Revolutionary Guard has used large-language models to assist in social engineering, in troubleshooting software errors, and even in studying how intruders might evade detection in a compromised network. That includes generating phishing emails "including one pretending to come from an international development agency and another attempting to lure prominent feminists to an attacker-built website on feminism." The AI helps accelerate and boost the email production.

— The Russian GRU military intelligence unit known as Fancy Bear has used the models to research satellite and radar technologies that may relate to the war in Ukraine.

— The Chinese cyberespionage group known as Aquatic Panda — which targets a broad range of industries, higher education and governments from France to Malaysia — has interacted with the models "in ways that suggest a limited exploration of how LLMs can augment their technical operations."

— The Chinese group Maverick Panda, which has targeted U.S. defense contractors among

ChatG

other sectors for more than a decade, had interactions with large-language models suggesting it was evaluating their effectiveness as a source of information "on potentially sensitive topics, high profile individuals, regional geopolitics, US influence, and internal affairs."

In a separate blog published Wednesday, OpenAI said the techniques discovered were consistent with previous assessments that found its current GPT-4 model chatbot offers "only limited, incremental capabilities for malicious cybersecurity tasks beyond what is already achievable with publicly available, non-AI powered tools."

Last April, the director of the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Jen Easterly, told Congress that "there are two epoch-defining threats and challenges. One is China, and the other is artificial intelligence."

Easterly said at the time that the U.S. needs to ensure AI is built with security in mind.

Critics of the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022 — and subsequent releases by competitors including Google and Meta — contend it was irresponsibly hasty, considering security was largely an afterthought in their development.

"Of course bad actors are using large-language models — that decision was made when Pandora's Box was opened," said Amit Yoran, CEO of the cybersecurity firm Tenable.

Some cybersecurity professionals complain about Microsoft's creation and hawking of tools to address vulnerabilities in large-language

models when it might more responsibly focus on making them more secure.

"Why not create more secure black-box LLM foundation models instead of selling defensive tools for a problem they are helping to create?" asked Gary McGraw, a computer security veteran and co-founder of the Berryville Institute of Machine Learning.

NYU professor and former AT&T Chief Security Officer Edward Amoroso said that while the use of AI and large-language models may not pose an immediately obvious threat, they "will eventually become one of the most powerful weapons in every nation-state military's offense."

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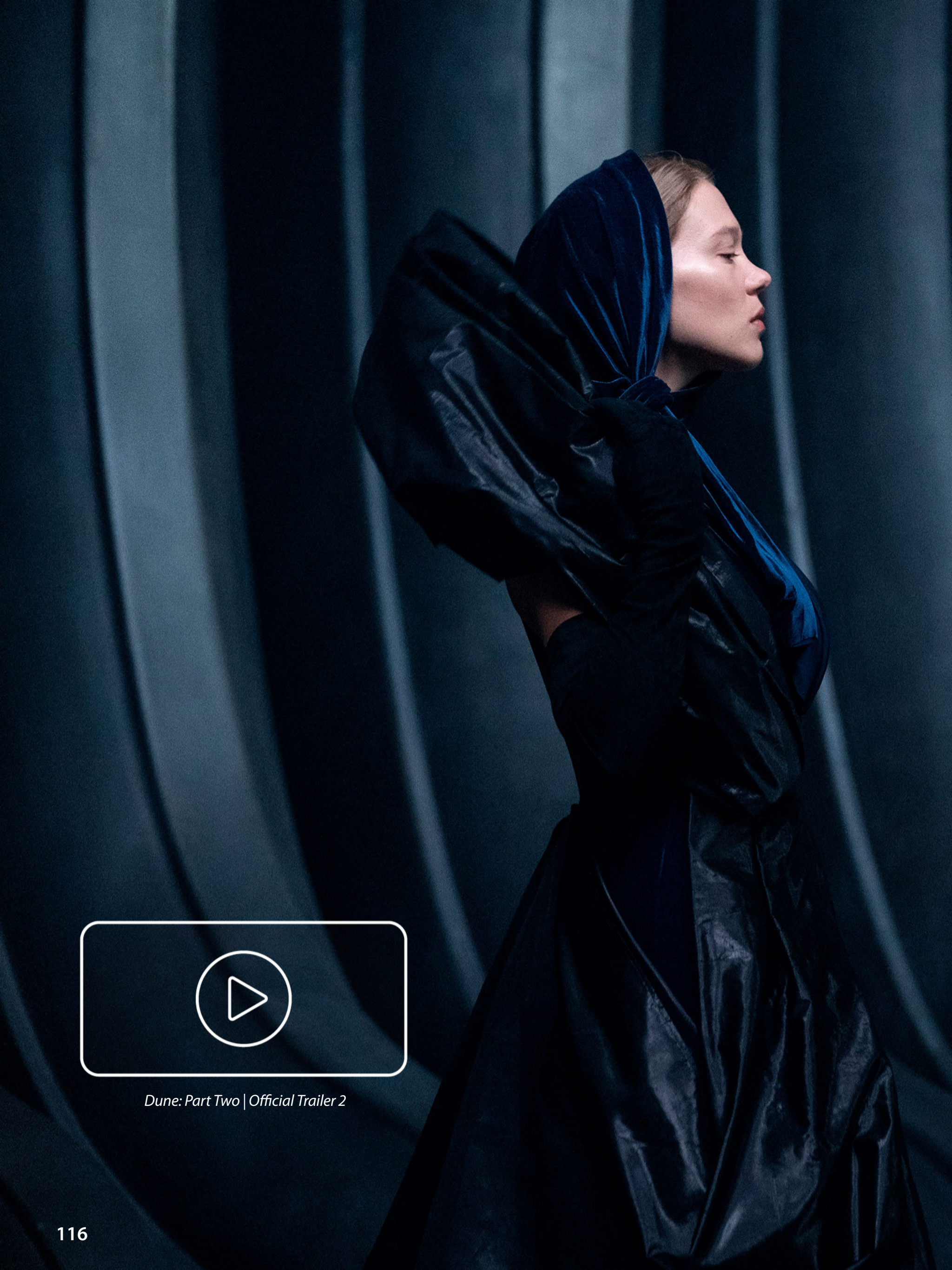
IN ‘DUNE: PART TWO,’ FILMMAKER DENIS VILLENEUVE REALIZES A LIFETIME DREAM



Dune: Part Two | Official Trailer 2

Dune: Part Two | Official Trailer

Denis Villeneuve doesn't feel like he came back to Arrakis for "Dune: Part Two." In his mind, he never left.

The sequel, which opens in theaters on March 1, is the culmination of a six-year filmmaking journey, preceded by 40 years of dreaming about it. And it's one that Christopher Nolan has already compared to "The Empire Strikes Back."

Realizing Frank Herbert's novel for the big screen is a feat that has bested and befuddled some of the greats, including David Lean, Alejandro Jodorowsky and David Lynch, the only one who actually got to make a film. But his 1984 film was such a flop that its two sequels were quickly abandoned.

Villeneuve finally got his chance at one of the more turbulent times in Hollywood history, facing two delayed releases (one because of the pandemic, the other because of the Hollywood strikes), an historic shift to streaming and zero guarantee that he would get a "Part Two" at all.

"The conditions could not have been worse to release (Part One)," Villeneuve said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. "And still the movie did a decent box office."

Even in that limbo time, he never stopped working on the script for "Part Two" knowing that if they got the greenlight, he wanted to be ready to go. By the time his cinematographer Greig Fraser was picking up the best cinematography Oscar for "Dune," they were deep into pre-production for the second. And everyone was soon back in Budapest with cameras rolling by July. But though they'd conquered the desert in "Part One," new challenges awaited.

Dune: Part Two | Official Trailer 3

TWO

"Dune: Part Two" would be much more technically challenging, with at least seven major action sequences compared to two in the first. It picks up with Timothée Chalamet's Paul Atreides in the aftermath of the calculated and devastating attack by a rival house on his family and followers who had just established control of the mineral rich desert planet Arrakis. With his father dead, Paul and his mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) retreat to the desert where they establish a tenuous alliance with Arrakis natives known as the Fremen (including Zendaya). Paul trains to fight alongside them against the Harkonnen invaders.

Among the challenges: Filming Chalamet "surfing" on a sandworm in a way that is thrilling and transportive and not at all silly – something that Villeneuve had to figure out how to translate from what he'd imagined into words that would make sense to all the craftspeople working to make it happen in the brutally hot sun.

But none of those stresses seemed to transfer to the atmosphere on location in Wadi Rum, Budapest and Abu Dhabi. In fact, Chalamet said, it was the opposite. Villeneuve appeared to be having fun while making it.

"Denis is so playful. It's like the greatest evidence of self-confidence to me," Chalamet said. "It's ultimately a playful, creative exercise to get to direct any movie. The man who takes himself too seriously, is more focused on the people around him, the audience, than the actual product reeks of a movie that's pretentious."

Josh Brolin, who has now worked with Villeneuve on three films, including "Sicario" and both "Dunes," where he plays Atreides warrior Gurney Halleck, said it takes a unique personality to be a

Dune: Part Two | Extended Sneak Preview

great filmmaker, but that Villeneuve is right up there with the Coen brothers in his ability to do it well.

"Great filmmakers that I've had the gift of being able to work with are misfits. They're true misfits. They're not cool people. They're socially totally inept," Brolin said. "And they found this medium to be able to work through, (where) they can express themselves wildly and specifically. And what's going on in their head that we never were privy to? Now we get to experience it."

Villeneuve has almost gotten used to delayed releases – and both times his films have benefitted from the cushion. The first was held almost a year because of the pandemic, which allowed him to tweak and perfect. This time, he got to do something different: Make a film transfer so that it could be projected on IMAX 70mm and 70mm, even though it was shot on digital.

"It's the ultimate viewing experience and the ultimate format," Villeneuve said.

"Dune: Part Two" cost a reported $122 million to produce and is arriving in theaters not a moment too soon. The marketplace is a little emptier than usual because of the residual effects of the labor standoff in Hollywood last year, and it's also a landscape where superheroes are no longer the trusty "tentpoles" that they once were.

But "Dune" is a different kind of franchise. The first "Dune" made just over $400 million even though it was also released day-and-date on Max (then HBOMax). And Villeneuve is more hopeful this time around. Audience appetite for theatrical is stronger than it was in late 2021, after all. He also believes "Part Two" is both more broadly entertaining and can be enjoyed without having seen the first.

"Part One was more meditative," he said. "We were following a boy discovering a culture. Now we are with the boy avenging his father, falling in love. And it's more of an action movie."

He knows that "Part Two" "has a soul" as well, but he's not quite ready to step back and enjoy it as the 13-year-old boy who started him on this path in the first place. It's one of those paradoxes of adapting something you love, that in order to do so, you have to sacrifice some or all of that, and it will no longer mean what it once did to you.

Before they started on the first, composer Hans Zimmer, also a lifetime fan of "Dune," asked him a question to this effect.

"He said to me, 'is it a good idea to try to life a dream that we had when we were kids? Is it meant to fail?'" Villeneuve said. "There's part of the movie that when I look at it, it's closed the dream. Other parts are new because it's an adaptation and I have to make choices and distort really the reality of the book in order to make it fit into a film format."

"It's mixed emotions," he said. "It's joy and pain."

But even if he can't yet experience it as a fan, his peers can. When Nolan compared it to "The Empire Strikes Back," Villeneuve demurred, but the internet went wild.

Villeneuve has left the door open for more, too. Herbert kept writing books, after all. But for now, he's going to step back and let "Dune" breathe a little. He's looking at his movies in the macro, in a way that might ensure the future of the medium he loves so much.

"What I tried to do with my last three movies is to push forward this idea of event and the grand scale," Villeneuve said. "I think that's the way movies will survive.".

"There's a tremendous amount of visual imagination and worldbuilding on a scale that I have not seen before in a very long time," Nolan said. "It's somebody using all of the advantages of cinema in a way that doesn't often happen."

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

"We all walked at the beginning into this project feeling confident," Villeneuve said. "And that confidence quickly eroded."

DENIS VILLENEUVE

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ELON MUSK'S NEURALINK MOVES LEGAL HOME TO NEVADA AFTER DELAWARE JUDGE INVALIDATES HIS TESLA PAY DEAL

Elon Musk's brain implant company Neuralink has moved its legal corporate home from Delaware to Nevada after a Delaware judge struck down Musk's $55.8 billion pay package as CEO of Tesla.

Neuralink, which has its physical headquarters in Fremont, California, became a Nevada company, according to state records. Delaware records also list the company's legal home as Nevada.

The move comes after Musk wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that shareholders of Austin-based Tesla would be asked to consider moving the company's corporate registration to Texas.

SAMSUNG
Breakthrough
Technology
for the Brain

"Never incorporate your company in the state of Delaware," he wrote in one post after the court ruling. He later added, "I recommend incorporating in Nevada or Texas if you prefer shareholders to decide matters."

Legal experts say most corporations set up legal shop in Delaware because laws there favor corporations. "Delaware built its preferred state of incorporation business by being friendly to company management, not shareholders," said Erik Gordon, a business and law professor at the University of Michigan.

On Jan. 30, Delaware Chancellor Kathaleen St. Jude McCormick invalidated the pay package that Tesla established for Musk in 2018, ruling that the process was "flawed" and the price "unfair." In her ruling, she called the package "the largest potential compensation opportunity ever observed in public markets by multiple orders of magnitude."

McCormick's ruling bumped Musk out of the top spot on the Forbes list of wealthiest people.

Musk, a co-founder of the privately held Neuralink, is listed as company president in Nevada documents. Messages were left seeking comment from Neuralink and Tesla.

McCormick determined that Tesla's board lacked independence from Musk. His lawyers said the package needed to be rich to give Musk an incentive not to leave — a line of reasoning the judge shot down.

"Swept up by the rhetoric of 'all upside,' or perhaps starry eyed by Musk's superstar appeal, the board never asked the $55.8 billion question: 'Was the plan even necessary for Tesla to retain Musk and achieve its goals?'" McCormick wrote.

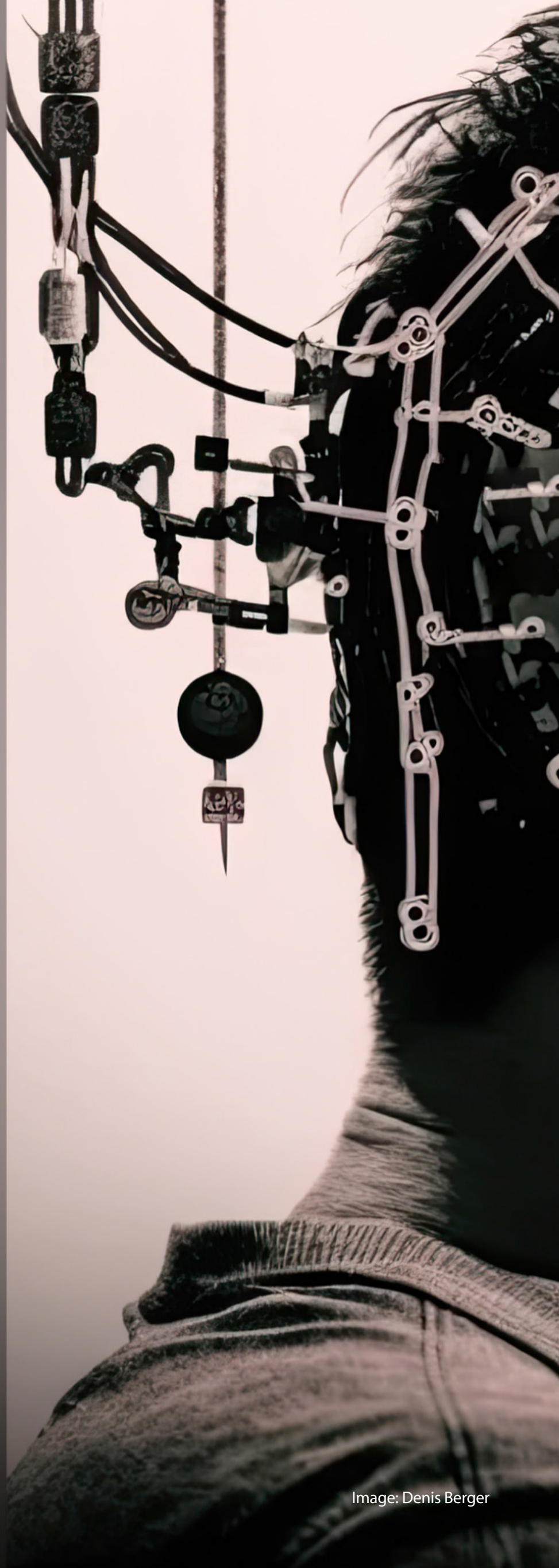
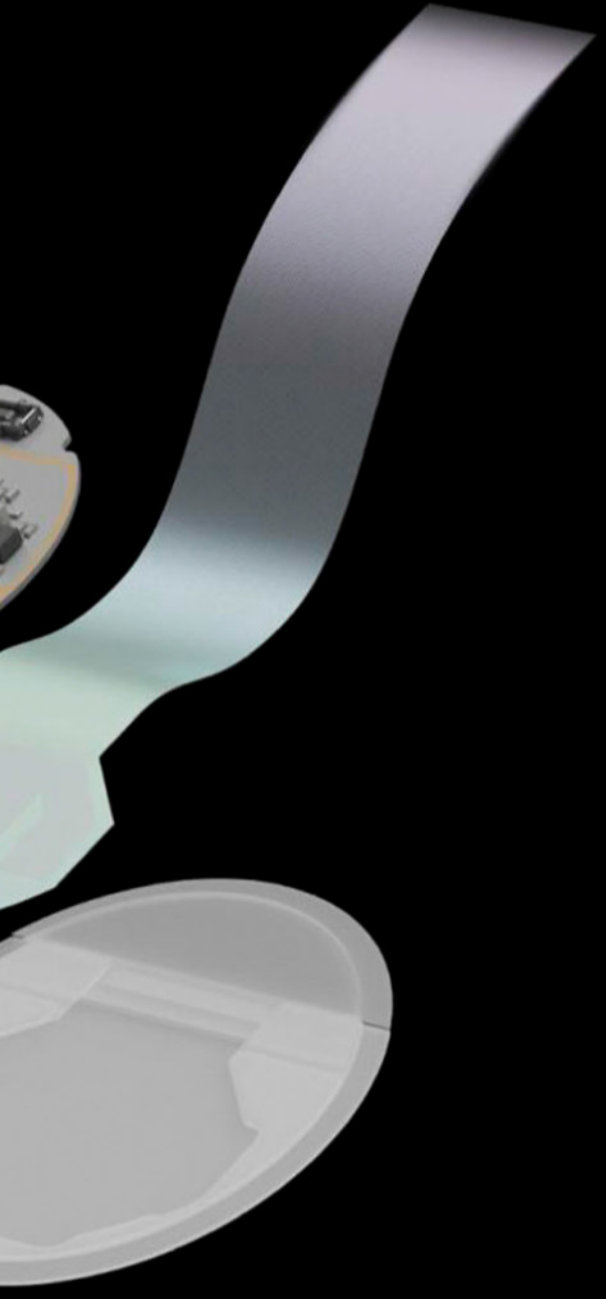


Image: Denis Berger



Musk's fans argue that he shouldn't be paid like other CEOs because he isn't like other CEOs. He and Tesla are practically inseparable, so keeping him as CEO is key to the company's growth. He built the company from an idea to the most valuable automaker in the world, last year selling more electric vehicles than any other company. His star power gets free publicity, so the company spends little on advertising. And he has forced the rest of the auto industry to accelerate plans for electric vehicles to counter Tesla's phenomenal growth.

McCormick's ruling came five years after shareholders filed a lawsuit accusing Musk and Tesla directors of breaching their duties and arguing that the pay package was a product of sham negotiations with directors who were not independent of him.

The defense countered that the pay plan was fairly negotiated by a compensation committee whose members were independent and had lofty performance milestones.

Musk wrote on X last month that the first human received an implant from Neuralink. The billionaire did not provide additional details about the patient.

MULTIPLE THREATS TO ELECTION SYSTEMS PROMPT US CYBERSECURITY AGENCY TO BOOST COOPERATION WITH STATES

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The nation's cybersecurity agency launched a program aimed at boosting election security in the states, shoring up support for local offices and hoping to provide reassurance to voters that this year's presidential elections will be safe and accurate.

Officials with the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency are introducing the program this week to the National Association of State Election Directors and National Association of Secretaries of State, which are meeting in the nation's capital.

For state and local election officials, the list of security challenges keeps growing. Among them: potential cyberattacks waged by foreign governments, criminal ransomware gangs attacking computer systems and the persistence of election misinformation that has led to harassment of election officials and undermined public confidence.

Just in the past few weeks, AI-generated robocalls surfaced in New Hampshire before the state's presidential primary and a cyberattack affecting the local government in Fulton County, Georgia, has created challenges for its election office.

The prospect of hostile governments abroad attacking election systems has been a particular concern this year for the agency. Eric Goldstein, CISA's executive assistant director for cybersecurity, described "a really difficult cybersecurity environment" that includes "extraordinary advances by nation-state adversaries China, Russia, Iran, North Korea."

CISA was formed in the aftermath of the 2016 election, when Russia sought to interfere with a multipronged effort that included accessing and

releasing campaign emails and scanning state voter registration systems for vulnerabilities. Election systems were designated as critical infrastructure, alongside the nation's banks, dams and nuclear power plants, opening them up to receiving additional support from the federal government.

The program announced this week includes 10 new hires, all of whom join the federal agency with extensive election experience. They will be based throughout the country and join other staff already in place that have been conducting cyber and physical security reviews for election offices that request them.

The agency's director, Jen Easterly, announced plans for the program at a July meeting of the state election directors in South Carolina. The new team will be entirely focused on elections, which is critical because of the complexities surrounding voting that vary by jurisdiction, said CISA Senior Advisor Cait Conley, who leads the agency's election security efforts.

"Understanding the complexity of each state's election operating environment and their security needs is critical to us being effective partners in helping them mitigate those needs and ensuring the infrastructure security and resilience," Conley said.

The new advisers include the former state election director in Texas, Keith Ingram; the former chief information officer for the Ohio Secretary of State's Office, Spencer Wood; and the former elections supervisor in Escambia County, Florida, David Stafford.

"No county is going through this alone without partners and no state is going through this

I Voted

alone without partners. And we're lucky to have this relationship with CISA to help make sure that our cybersecurity infrastructure is hardened against efforts by bad faith actors to interfere with it," said Al Schmidt, who serves as Pennsylvania's chief elections officer.

State election officials welcomed the additional help. Some relayed to federal officials concerns about their personal safety, given the death threats and harassment they have faced since the 2020 election.

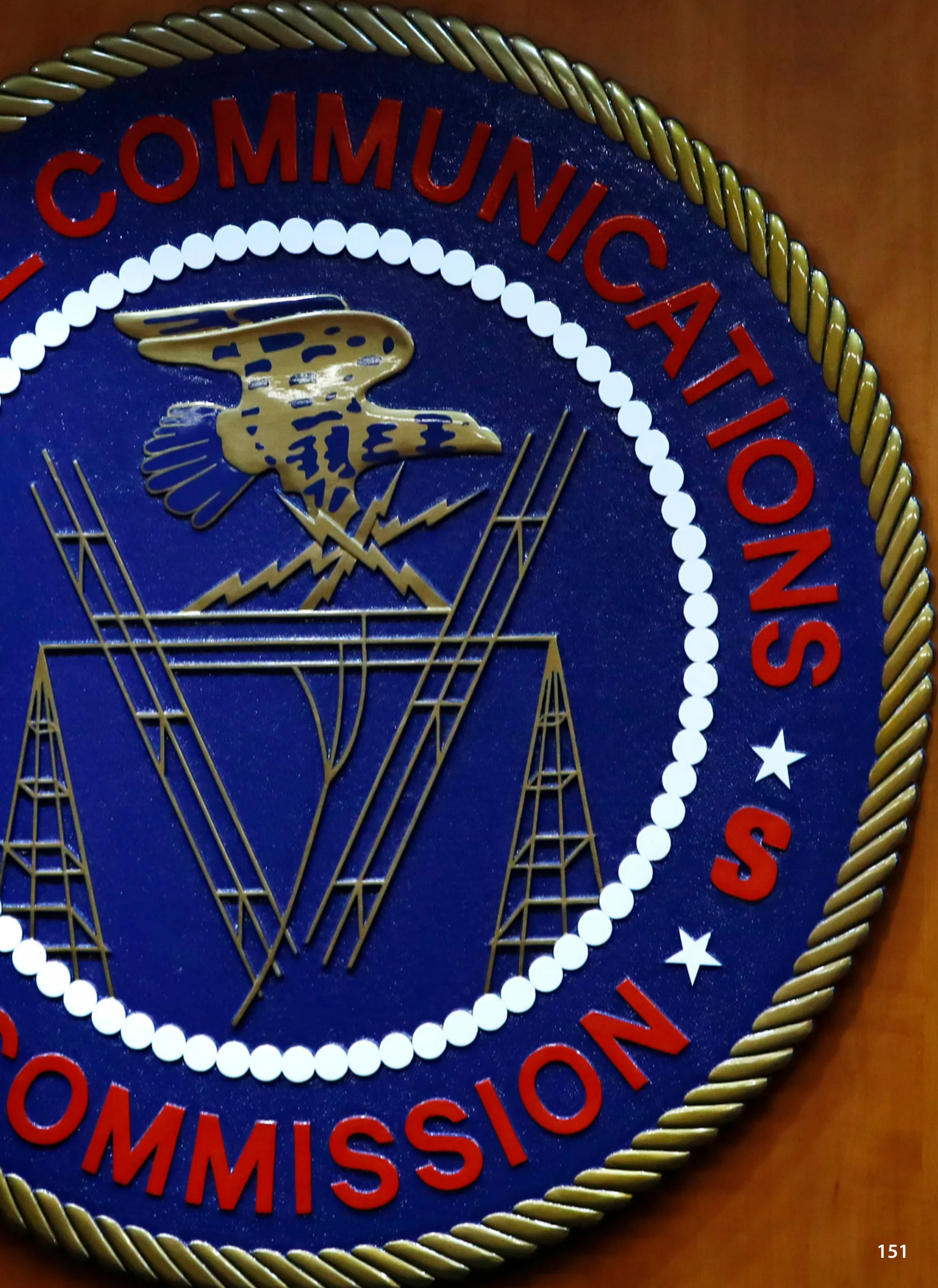
"I know what they are up against, particularly in the smaller jurisdictions. I want to be there to help them prepare for what's ahead and support them on the good and more challenging days by linking them to our expertise and services," said Lori Augino, another of the new election security advisers who previously served as the state election director in Washington state. "The resiliency of our election system depends on this network of support."

Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the North Carolina State Board of Elections, said she has already spoken with the new CISA election security adviser for her region and shared some of her needs.

"For CISA to be able to be more on the front lines assisting us is really the right step forward," Brinson Bell said.

VOTE
VOTE

AI-GENERATED VOICES IN ROBOCALLS CAN DECEIVE VOTERS. THE FCC JUST MADE THEM ILLEGAL


COMMUNICATIONS
COMMISSION

The Federal Communications Commission outlawed robocalls that contain voices generated by artificial intelligence, a decision that sends a clear message that exploiting the technology to scam people and mislead voters won't be tolerated.

The unanimous ruling targets robocalls made with AI voice-cloning tools under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, a 1991 law restricting junk calls that use artificial and prerecorded voice messages.

The announcement comes as New Hampshire authorities are advancing their investigation into AI-generated robocalls that mimicked President Joe Biden's voice to discourage people from voting in the state's first-in-the-nation primary last month.

Effective immediately, the regulation empowers the FCC to fine companies that use AI voices in their calls or block the service providers that carry them. It also opens the door for call recipients to file lawsuits and gives state attorneys general a new mechanism to crack down on violators, according to the FCC.

The agency's chairwoman, Jessica Rosenworcel, said bad actors have been using AI-generated voices in robocalls to misinform voters, impersonate celebrities and extort family members.

"It seems like something from the far-off future, but this threat is already here," Rosenworcel told as the commission was considering the regulations. "All of us could be on the receiving end of these faked calls, so that's why we felt the time to act was now."

Under the consumer protection law, telemarketers generally cannot use automated dialers or artificial or prerecorded voice messages to call cellphones, and they cannot make such calls to landlines without prior written consent from the call recipient.

The new ruling classifies AI-generated voices in robocalls as "artificial" and thus enforceable by the same standards, the FCC said.

Those who break the law can face steep fines, with a maximum of more than $23,000 per call, the FCC said. The agency has previously used the consumer law to clamp down on robocallers interfering in elections, including imposing a $5 million fine on two conservative hoaxers for falsely warning people in predominantly Black areas that voting by mail could heighten their risk of arrest, debt collection and forced vaccination.

The law also gives call recipients the right to take legal action and potentially recover up to $1,500 in damages for each unwanted call.

Josh Lawson, director of AI and democracy at the Aspen Institute, said even with the FCC's ruling, voters should prepare themselves for personalized spam to target them by phone, text and social media.

"The true dark hats tend to disregard the stakes and they know what they're doing is unlawful," he said. "We have to understand that bad actors

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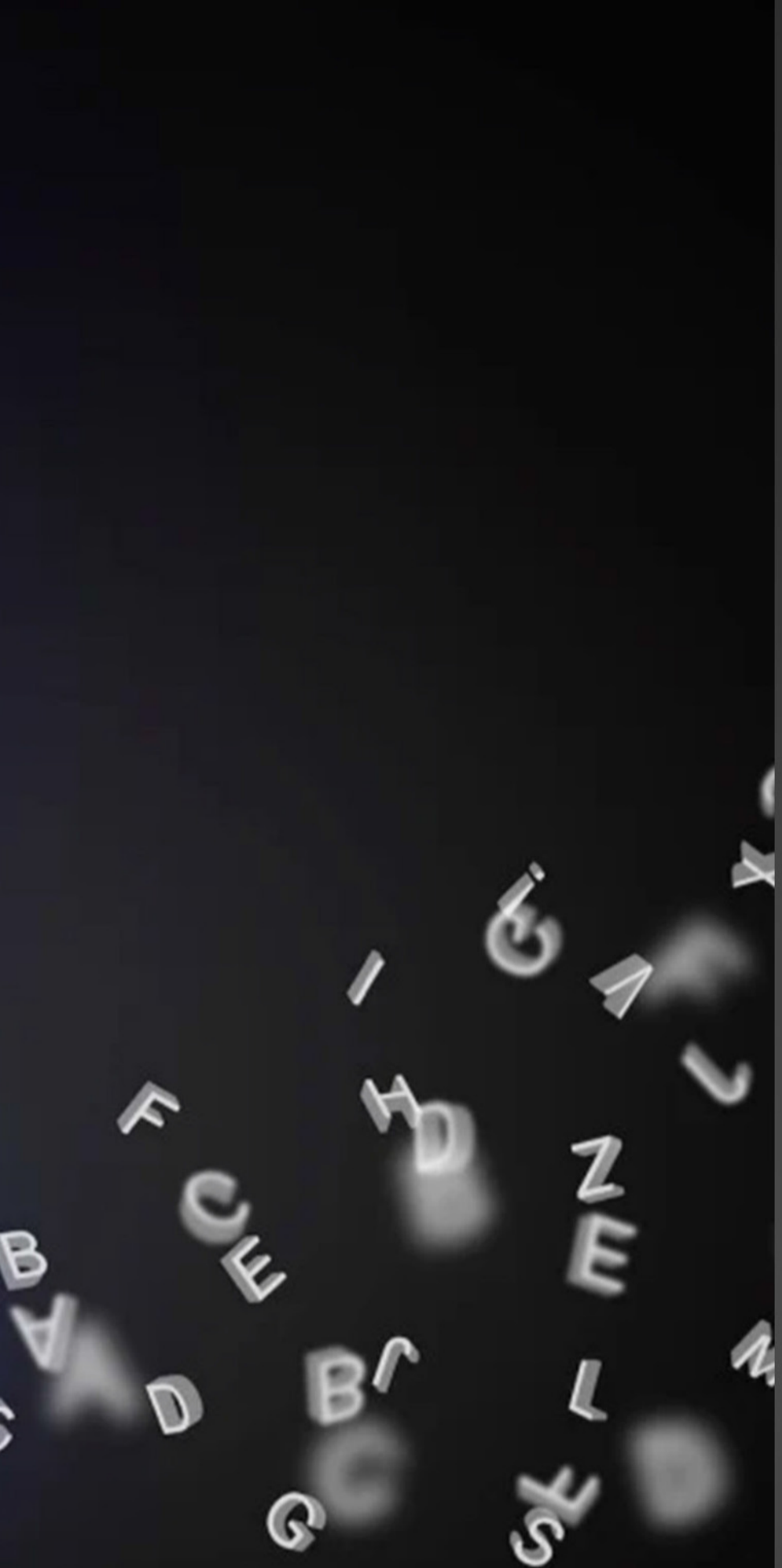


are going to continue to rattle the cages and push the limits."

Kathleen Carley, a Carnegie Mellon professor who specializes in computational disinformation, said that in order to detect AI abuse of voice technology, one needs to be able to clearly identify that the audio was AI generated.

That is possible now, she said, "because the technology for generating these calls has existed for awhile. It's well understood and it makes standard mistakes. But that technology will get better."

Sophisticated generative AI tools, from voice-cloning software to image generators, already are in use in elections in the U.S. and around the world.

Last year, as the U.S. presidential race got underway, several campaign advertisements used AI-generated audio or imagery, and some candidates experimented with using AI chatbots to communicate with voters.

Bipartisan efforts in Congress have sought to regulate AI in political campaigns, but no federal legislation has passed, with the general election nine months away.

Rep. Yvette Clarke, who introduced legislation to regulate AI in politics, lauded the FCC for its ruling but said now Congress needs to act.

"I believe Democrats and Republicans can agree that AI-generated content used to deceive people is a bad thing, and we need to work together to help folks have the tools necessary to help discern what's real and what isn't," said Clarke, D-N.Y.

The AI-generated robocalls that sought to influence New Hampshire's Jan. 23 primary election used a voice similar to Biden's, employed his often-used phrase, "What a bunch of malarkey" and falsely suggested that voting in the primary would preclude voters from casting a ballot in November.

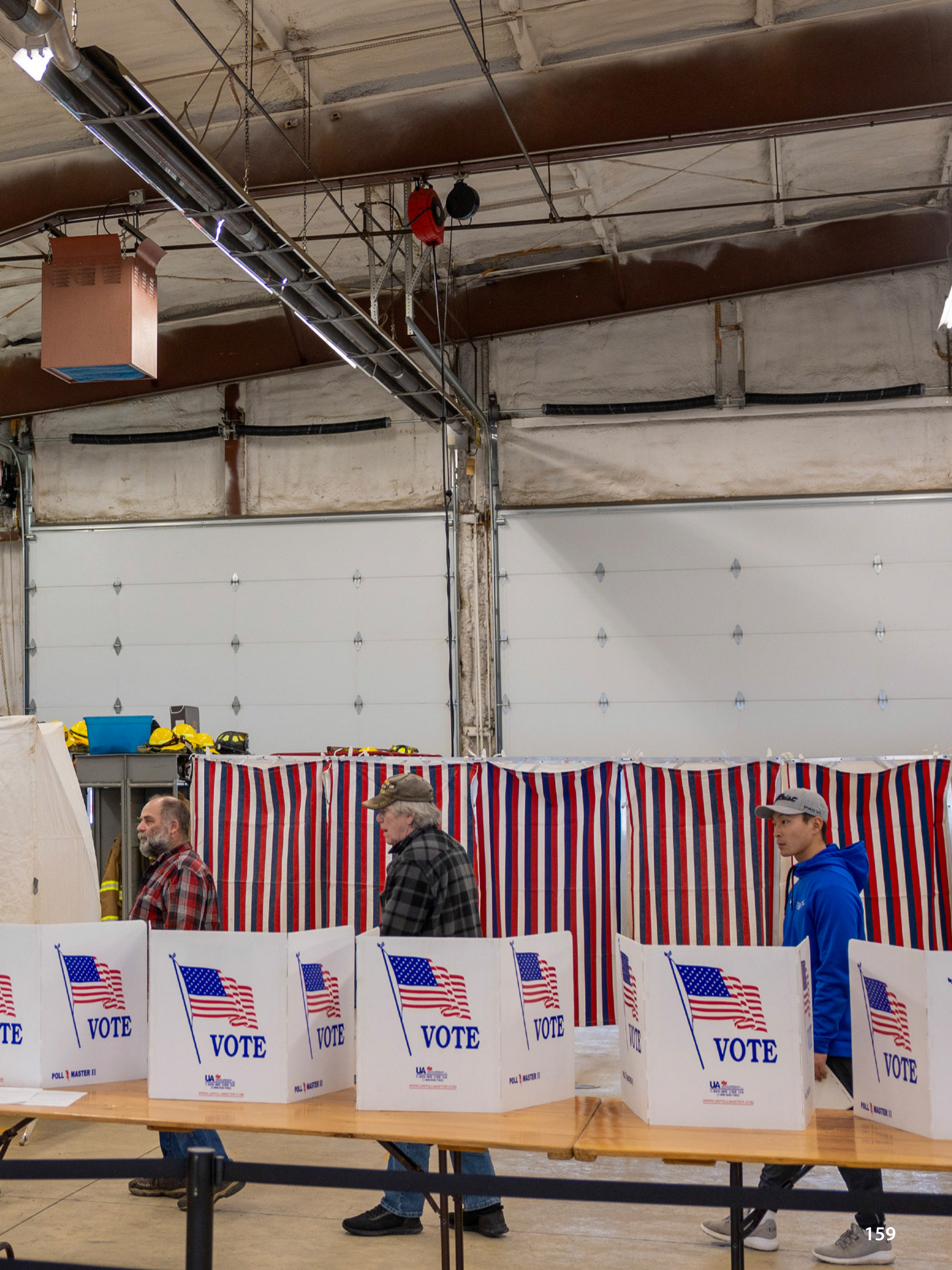
"New Hampshire had a taste of how AI can be used inappropriately in the election process," New Hampshire Secretary of State David Scanlan said. "It is certainly appropriate to try and get our arms around the use and the enforcement so that we're not misleading the voting population in a way that could harm our elections."

The state's attorney general, John Formella, said that investigators had identified the Texas-based Life Corp. and its owner, Walter Monk as the source of the calls, which went to thousands of state residents, mostly registered Democrats. He said the calls were transmitted by another Texas-based company, Lingo Telecom.

According to the FCC, both Lingo Telecom and Life Corp. have been investigated for illegal robocalls in the past.

Lingo Telecom said in a statement that it "acted immediately" to help with the investigation into the robocalls impersonating Biden. The company said it "had no involvement whatsoever in the production of the call content."

A man who answered the business line for Life Corp. declined to comment.


VOTE
POLL MASTER II

OPENAI CEO WARNS THAT ‘SOCIETAL MISALIGNMENTS’ COULD MAKE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DANGEROUS

The CEO of ChatGPT-maker OpenAI said this week that the dangers that keep him awake at night regarding artificial intelligence are the “very subtle societal misalignments” that could make the systems wreak havoc.

Sam Altman, speaking at the World Governments Summit in Dubai via a video call, reiterated his call for a body like the International Atomic Energy Agency to be created to oversee AI that’s likely advancing faster than the world expects.

Image: Kamran Jebreili

القمة العالمية للحكومات 2024
WORLD GOVERNMENTS SUMMIT 2024

"There's some things in there that are easy to imagine where things really go wrong. And I'm not that interested in the killer robots walking on the street direction of things going wrong," Altman said. "I'm much more interested in the very subtle societal misalignments where we just have these systems out in society and through no particular ill intention, things just go horribly wrong."

However, Altman stressed that the AI industry, like OpenAI, shouldn't be in the driver's seat when it comes to making regulations governing the industry.

"We're still in the stage of a lot of discussion. So there's you know, everybody in the world is having a conference. Everyone's got an idea, a policy paper, and that's OK," Altman said. "I think we're still at a time where debate is needed and healthy, but at some point in the next few years, I think we have to move towards an action plan with real buy-in around the world."

OpenAI, a San Francisco-based artificial intelligence startup, is one of the leaders in the field. Microsoft has invested billions of dollars in OpenAI. The Associated Press has signed a deal with OpenAI for it to access its news archive. Meanwhile, The New York Times has sued OpenAI and Microsoft over the use of its stories without permission to train OpenAI's chatbots.

OpenAI's success has made Altman the public face for generative AI's rapid commercialization — and the fears over what may come from the new technology.

The UAE, an autocratic federation of seven hereditarily ruled sheikhdoms, has signs of that risk. Speech remains tightly controlled.

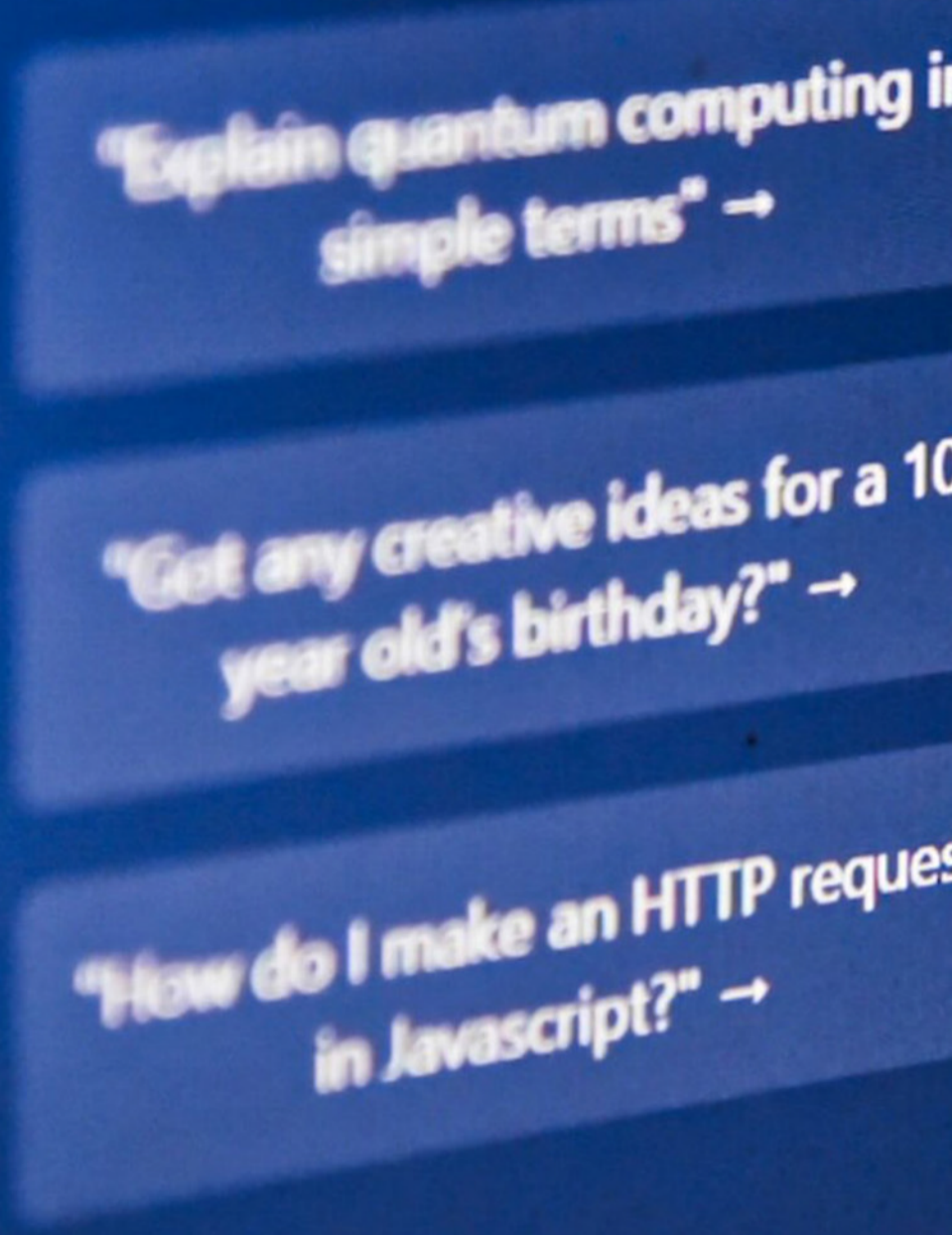
Those restrictions affect the flow of accurate information — the same details AI programs like ChatGPT rely on as machine-learning systems to provide their answers for users.

The Emirates also has the Abu Dhabi firm G42, overseen by the country's powerful national security adviser. G42 has what experts suggest is the world's leading Arabic-language artificial intelligence model. The company has faced spying allegations for its ties to a mobile phone app identified as spyware. It has also faced claims it could have gathered genetic material secretly from Americans for the Chinese government.

G42 has said it would cut ties to Chinese suppliers over American concerns. However, the discussion with Altman, moderated by the UAE's Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence Omar al-Olama, touched on none of the local concerns.

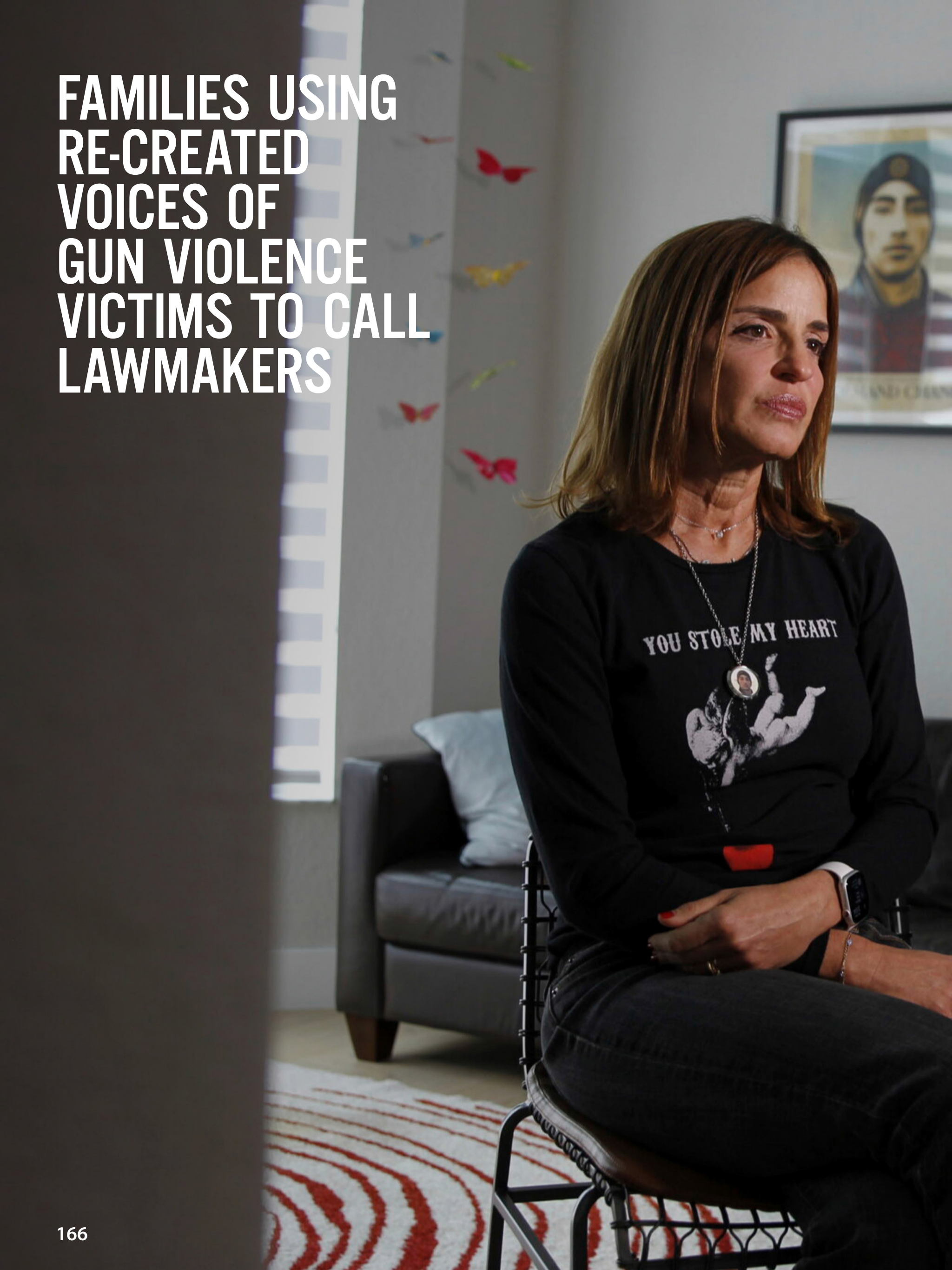
For his part, Altman said he was heartened to see that schools, where teachers feared students would use AI to write papers, now embrace the technology as crucial for the future. But he added that AI remains in its infancy.

"I think the reason is the current technology that we have is like ... that very first cellphone with a black-and-white screen," Altman said. "So give us some time. But I will say I think in a few more years it'll be much better than it is now. And in a decade it should be pretty remarkable."



ChatGPT
Capabilities
Limitations
Remembers what user said earlier in the conversation
Allows user to provide follow-up corrections
Trained to decline inappropriate requests

FAMILIES USING RE-CREATED VOICES OF GUN VIOLENCE VICTIMS TO CALL LAWMAKERS



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Joaquin "Guac" Oliver died in the 2018 Parkland, Florida, high school massacre, but federal lawmakers who oppose tighter gun regulations began getting phone calls in his voice on Wednesday, lambasting them for their position.

The families of Oliver and five others killed with guns are using artificial intelligence to create messages in their loved ones' voices and robocalling them to senators and House members who support the National Rifle Association and oppose tougher gun laws. The protest is being run through The Shotline website, where visitors select which offices receive calls.

The campaign launched on Valentine's Day because it's the sixth anniversary of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which left the 17-year-old Oliver, 13 other students and three staff members dead. Oliver was murdered as he lay wounded on the floor, the fatal bullet blasting through the hand he raised as the 19-year-old killer leveled his AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle.

Manuel and Patricia Oliver, Joaquin's parents, say the campaign is based on the oft-cited idea that if someone wants laws changed, the first step is calling elected representatives. Immigrants from Venezuela who became U.S. citizens, they want the sale of guns like the AR-15 banned.

"We come from a place where gun violence is a problem, but you will never see a 19-year-old with an AR-15 getting into a school and shooting people," Manuel Oliver said. "There's a reason for the gun violence in a Third World country. There's no reason for the gun violence and the amount of victims in the United States."

After Joaquin's murder, the Olivers founded Change the Ref, which is sponsoring the website with March for Our Lives, a group created by Stoneman Douglas students. Both recruit young people through nontraditional demonstrations like the AI calls and "die-ins," where students protested inside a supermarket chain that donated to a pro-NRA politician.

"When you keep being traditional ... listening over and over and over to the same people lecturing you with the same stats, nothing changes," Patricia Oliver said.

To make the recordings, the Olivers and other families gave an AI company audio of their loved ones and it re-created their voices, changing tone and pattern based on relatives' suggestions.

Joaquin's AI voice identifies him and then says, "Many students and teachers were murdered on Valentine's Day ... by a person using an AR-15, but you don't care. You never did. It's been six years and you've done nothing."

It continues, "I died that day in Parkland. My body was destroyed by a weapon of war. I'm back today because my parents used AI to re-create my voice to call you. Other victims like me will be calling too, again and again, to demand action. How many calls will it take for you to care? How many dead voices will you hear before you finally listen?"

The NRA did not respond to phone calls and emails seeking comment.

In 2020, the Olivers used AI to create a video of Joaquin urging young voters to choose candidates who support stricter gun laws. Critics

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FOR GUN SAFETY

accused them of politicizing his death to thwart their rights as law-abiding gun owners.

"They put words in a dead kid's mouth. If my father did this to me I would haunt him for the rest of his life," one wrote on YouTube.

The Olivers bristle at the suggestion they don't know what Joaquin would say.

"I know exactly what my son thought," Manual Oliver said. "Joaquin took enough time to write his thoughts, his principles, his ideas, his way of living, his dreams, his goals. Everything is out there on social media."

Others involved in the new campaign include the families of 23-year-old Akilah Dasilva, one of four people slain during a 2018 shooting at a Waffle House restaurant in Tennessee, and 10-year-old Uziyah Garcia, who died in the 2022 massacre at a Uvalde, Texas, elementary school. There are also the parents of 15-year-old Ethan Song, who died in an accidental shooting, and a 20-year-old murder victim and the family of a man who committed suicide.

Brett Cross, the uncle who was raising Uziyah, said the boy wanted to help people as a police officer. In the AI's message, Uziyah's voice says, "I'm a 4th grader at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Or at least I was when a man with an AR-15 came into my school and killed 18 of my classmates, two teachers and me." His voice then tells lawmakers, "What is it going to take for you to help make sure violence like this stops?"

Cross said his family is participating "so that no other child will have to go through what Uzi did. No other parent should have to go through what we have."

Song shot himself in 2018 at his best friend's house in Connecticut while the two played with a handgun, one of several firearms the other boy's father hadn't locked away. Mike and Kristin Song created a message in their son's voice pushing for a federal law making it a crime to not properly store guns in homes where children live.

"You would think the stacking up of our dead children's coffins would be enough to create a cultural shift in this country, but sadly our message is really falling on deaf ears," Kristin Song said.

Other families who lost loved ones to gun violence will be allowed to add their victim's re-created voice to the project, which runs indefinitely.

The Olivers aren't alone among Stoneman Douglas families in their public advocacy since the massacre, with positions taken on both sides of the gun debate.

But while many others stick primarily to addressing rallies, social media posts and lobbying — and have had some success — the Olivers, particularly Manuel, get in opponents' faces and challenge allies to be brazen. They call themselves "the rebel side of the gun violence prevention movement."

Manuel Oliver's rally speeches are often laced with obscenities. He was arrested in 2022 after he climbed a construction crane near the White House, unfurling a banner that demanded President Joe Biden enact stricter gun laws. Months later, he was ejected from a White House event for yelling at the president.

An artist, he painted an anti-gun mural across the street from the NRA's Virginia headquarters as gun-toting counter-protestors watched. He tours the country with a one-man play about his son and his murder, the performances punctuated by him hammering holes into a life-size portrait of Joaquin, each representing the bullets that struck him.

"We don't have nothing to lose here — we already lost everything," Manuel Oliver said. "For me, (protesting) is normal. The only thing that is not normal is that we are allowing our society to let people die."

GM'S CRUISE ROBOTAXI UNIT HIRES VETERAN FORD AND APPLE OFFICIAL TO BE ITS SAFETY CHIEF AFTER CRASH

cruise
SF COVID-19
DELIVERY
RESPONSE

Cruise, the troubled General Motors autonomous vehicle unit, has hired a veteran automotive and technology company safety official for the critical position of chief safety officer.

Steve Kenner, who has held top safety positions at multiple companies over nearly four decades, started the job this week, Cruise said in a statement.

Most recently he was vice president of safety at Kodiak, a self-driving truck company, the statement said. He also has held leadership positions at Apple, Uber and Aurora, another company that makes hardware and software for autonomous trucks.

Kenner started his career as an engineer at General Motors and once served as global safety director at crosstown rival Ford.

He comes to Cruise at a pivotal time, four months after a Cruise robotaxi dragged a San Francisco pedestrian roughly 20 feet (6 meters) to the curb at roughly 7 miles per hour (11 kilometers per hour), after the pedestrian was hit by a human-driven vehicle.

But the California Public Utilities Commission, which in August granted Cruise a permit to operate an around-the-clock fleet of computer-driven taxis throughout San Francisco, alleged Cruise then covered up details of the crash for more than two weeks.

The incident resulted in Cruise's license to operate its driverless fleet in California being suspended by regulators and triggered a purge of its leadership — in addition to layoffs that jettisoned about a quarter of its workforce — as GM curtailed its once-lofty ambitions in self-driving technology.

DELIVERY

A new management team that General Motors installed at Cruise following the October incident acknowledged it didn't fully inform regulators.

"Safety requires that every team within a company work together to put passengers and other road users first," Kenner said in the statement. "That partnership must include regulators, and I look forward to earning their trust."

cruise
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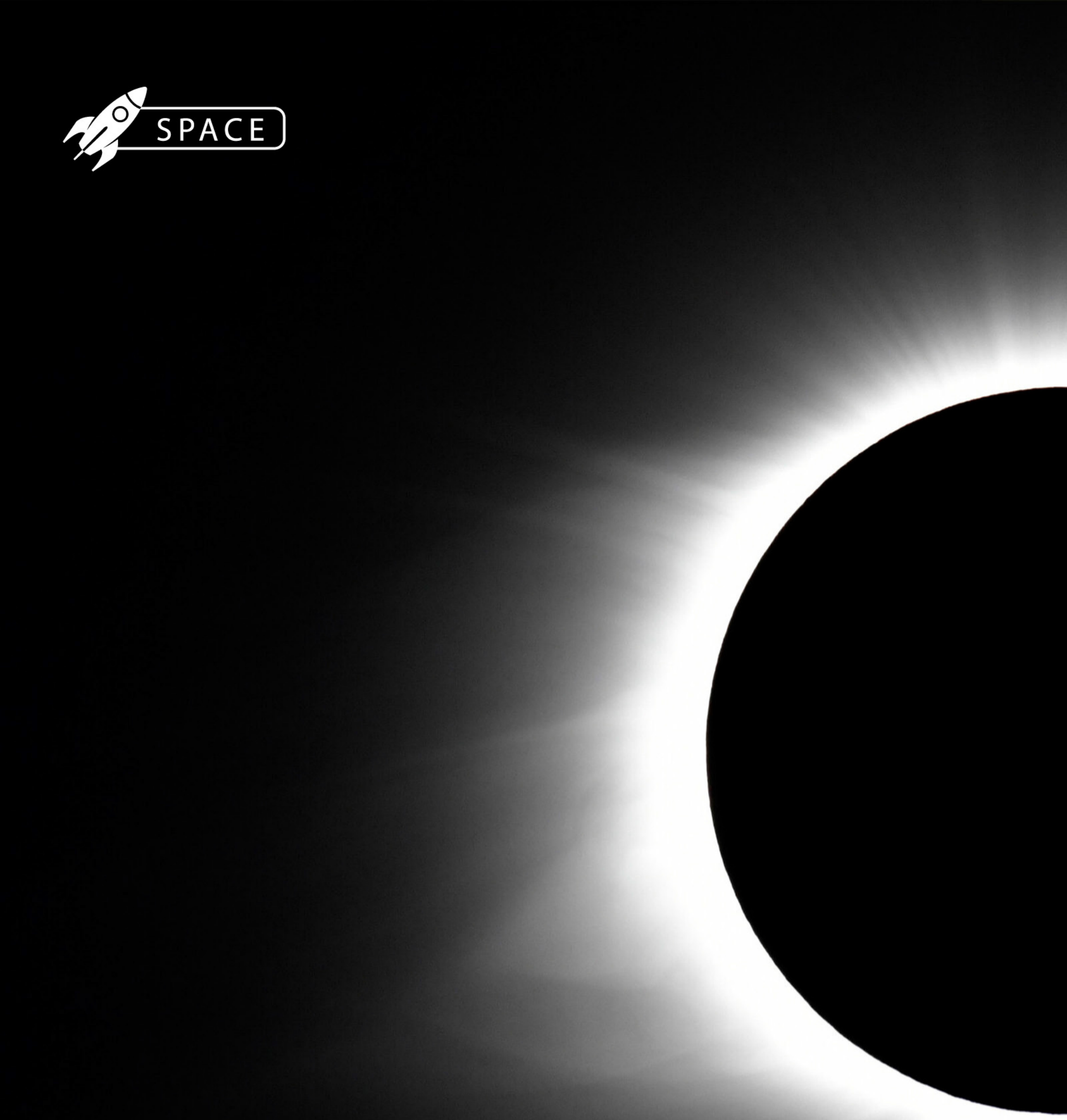


COUNTDOWN BEGINS FOR APRIL'S TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE. WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT WATCH PARTIES AND SAFE VIEWING

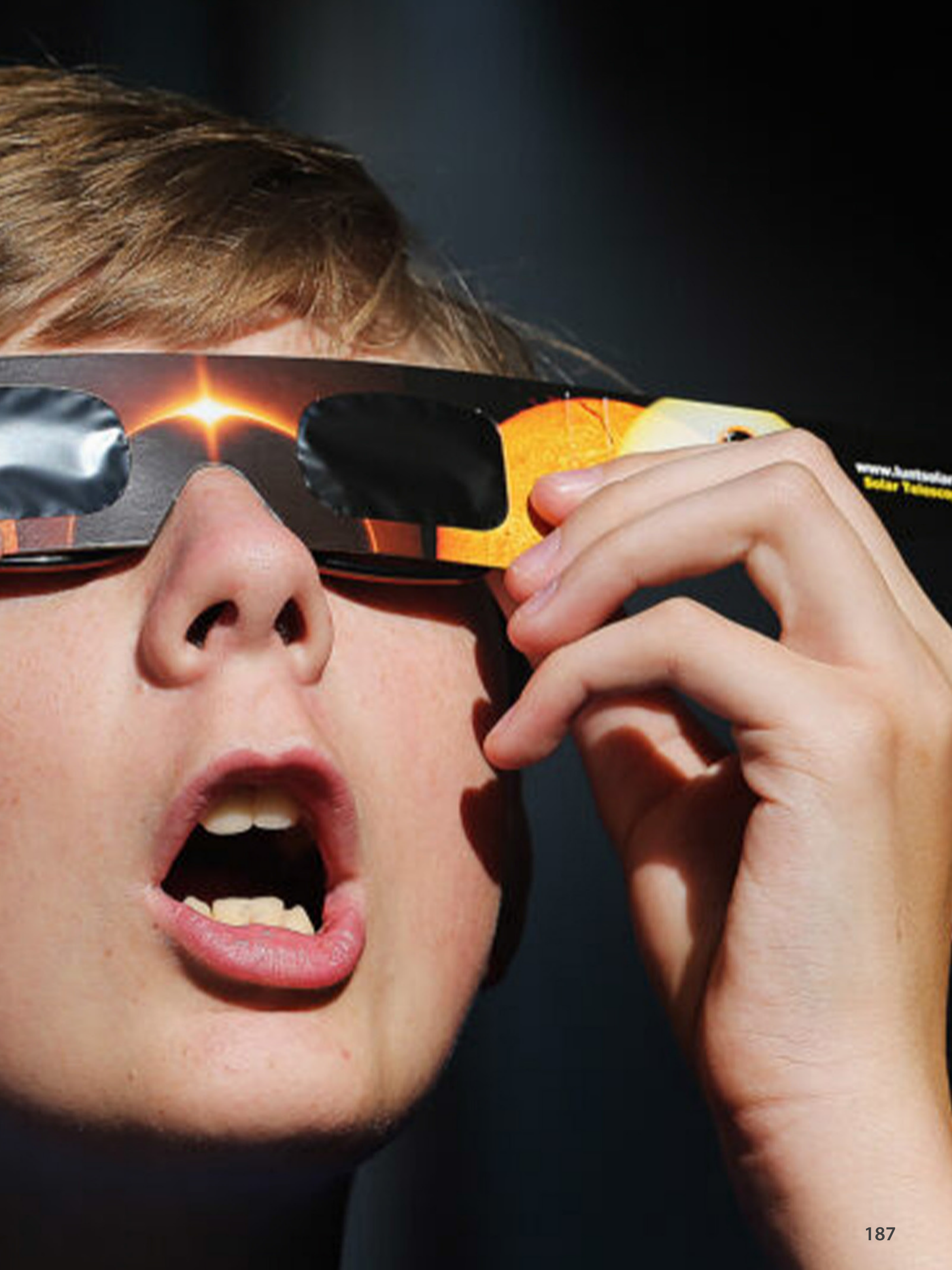
The sun is about to pull another disappearing act across North America, turning day into night during a total solar eclipse.

The peak spectacle on April 8 will last up to 4 minutes, 28 seconds in the path of total darkness — twice as long as the total solar eclipse that dimmed U.S. skies in 2017.

This eclipse will take a different and more populated route, entering over Mexico's Pacific coast, dashing up through Texas and Oklahoma, and crisscrossing the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic and New England, before exiting over eastern Canada into the Atlantic.

An estimated 44 million people live inside the 115-mile-wide (185-kilometer-wide) path of totality stretching from Mazatlán, Mexico to Newfoundland; about 32 million of them are in the U.S., guaranteeing jammed roads for the must-see celestial sensation.

The eclipse will allow many to share in the "wonder of the universe without going very far," said NASA's eclipse program manager Kelly Korreck.



Sunglasses won't cut it during the April 8 eclipse. Special eclipse glasses are crucial for safely observing the sun as the moon marches across the late morning and afternoon sky on April 8, covering more and more and then less and less of our star. (AP Video/Shelby Lum)

Here's what to know about April's extravaganza and how to prepare:

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE?

The moon will line up perfectly between the Earth and the sun, blotting out the sunlight. It will take just a couple hours for the moon's shadow to slice a diagonal line from the southwest to the northeast across North America, briefly plunging communities along the track into darkness.

Fifteen U.S. states will get a piece of the action, albeit two of them — Tennessee and Michigan — just barely.

Among the cities smack dab in the action: Dallas; Little Rock, Arkansas; Indianapolis, Cleveland, Ohio; Buffalo, New York; and Montreal — making for the continent's biggest eclipse crowd.

Don't fret if you don't have front-row seats. Practically everyone on the continent can catch at least a partial eclipse. The farther from the path of totality, the smaller the moon's bite will be out of the sun. In Seattle and Portland, Oregon, about as far away as you can get in the continental U.S., one-third of the sun will be swallowed.

WHY IS TOTALITY LONGER?

By a cosmic stroke of luck, the moon will make the month's closest approach to Earth the day before the total solar eclipse. That puts the moon just 223,000 miles (360,000 kilometers) away on eclipse day.

The moon will appear slightly bigger in the sky thanks to that proximity, resulting in an especially long period of sun-blocked darkness.

What's more, the Earth and moon will be 93 million miles (150 million kilometers) from the sun that day, the average distance.

When a closer moon pairs up with a more distant sun, totality can last as long as an astounding 7 1/2 minutes. The last time the world saw more than seven minutes of totality was in 1973 over Africa. That won't happen again until 2150 over the Pacific.

HOW DO I SAFELY WATCH THE ECLIPSE?

Sunglasses won't cut it. Special eclipse glasses are crucial for safely observing the sun as the moon marches across the late morning and afternoon sky, covering more and more and then less and less of our star.

During totality when the sun is completely shrouded, it's fine to remove your glasses and

SCAN QR CODE FOR MORE
SOLAR ECLIPSE INFO
SUN CATCHER
SOLAR ECLIPSE
EXPLORE SCIENTIFIC
CERTIFIED SAFE
SOLAR ECLIPSE VIEWING
MEETS ISO 12312-2
APRIL 8TH
2024
TOTAL
ECLIPSE PATH
OCT. 20
ANNU
ECLIPS

look with your naked eyes. But before and after, certified eclipse glasses are essential to avoid eye damage. Just make sure they're not scratched or torn.

Cameras, binoculars and telescopes must be outfitted with special solar filters for safe viewing. Bottom line: Never look at an exposed sun without proper protection any day of the year.

WHERE ARE SOME ECLIPSE WATCH PARTIES?

Towns up and down the path of totality are throwing star parties. Festivals, races, yoga retreats, drum circles and more will unfold at museums, fairgrounds, parks, stadiums, wineries, breweries and even one of Ohio's oldest drive-in movie theaters and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Besides looking up, you can attend a "space prom" in Texas Hill Country, get married at eclipse-themed ceremonies in Tiffin, Ohio, and Russellville, Arkansas, or brush up on moonwalking history at the Armstrong Air and Space Museum in Wapakoneta, Ohio — Neil Armstrong's hometown.

As the eclipse unfolds, NASA will launch small rockets with science instruments into the upper atmosphere from Virginia and chase totality's shadow from high-altitude planes. Satellites and the International Space Station crew will attempt to capture the show from space.

WHEN IS THE NEXT TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE?

Full solar eclipses occur every year or two or three, often in the middle of nowhere like the

South Pacific or Antarctic. The next total solar eclipse, in 2026, will grace the northern fringes of Greenland, Iceland and Spain.

North America won't experience totality again until 2033, with Alaska getting sole dibs. Then that's it until 2044, when totality will be confined to Western Canada, Montana and North Dakota.

There won't be another U.S. eclipse, spanning coast to coast, until 2045. That one will stretch from Northern California all the way to Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Aside from Carbondale, Illinois, in the crosshairs of both the 2017 and 2024 eclipses, it usually takes 400 years to 1,000 years before totality returns to the same spot, according to NASA's Korreck.

AIRBNB POSTS A $349 MILLION FOURTH-QUARTER LOSS AFTER SETTLING TAX DISPUTE WITH ITALY

Airbnb said this week that it lost $349 million in the fourth quarter due to an income tax settlement with Italy, but bookings and revenue rose, and the short-term rental giant said demand remains strong.

The company forecast first-quarter revenue that would meet or beat Wall Street expectations.

However, the pace of bookings growth is likely to "moderate" from the fourth quarter into the first, and the early timing of Easter could hurt growth in the second quarter, Airbnb said.

The fourth quarter was marred by $1 billion in one-time tax withholding expenses and lodging tax reserves.

The vacation-rental platform disclosed in December that it would pay Italy's tax agency 576 million euros ($621 million at the time) to a case involving withholding from property hosts in that country. Airbnb not admit wrongdoing, and company officials say they don't fact any similar liability in other countries.

Excluding the special expenses, Airbnb said it would have earned $489 million.

Revenue rose 17% to $2.22 billion, beating the $2.17 billion forecast of analysts in a FactSet survey. Bookings rose 12%, and the average daily rate gained 3%.

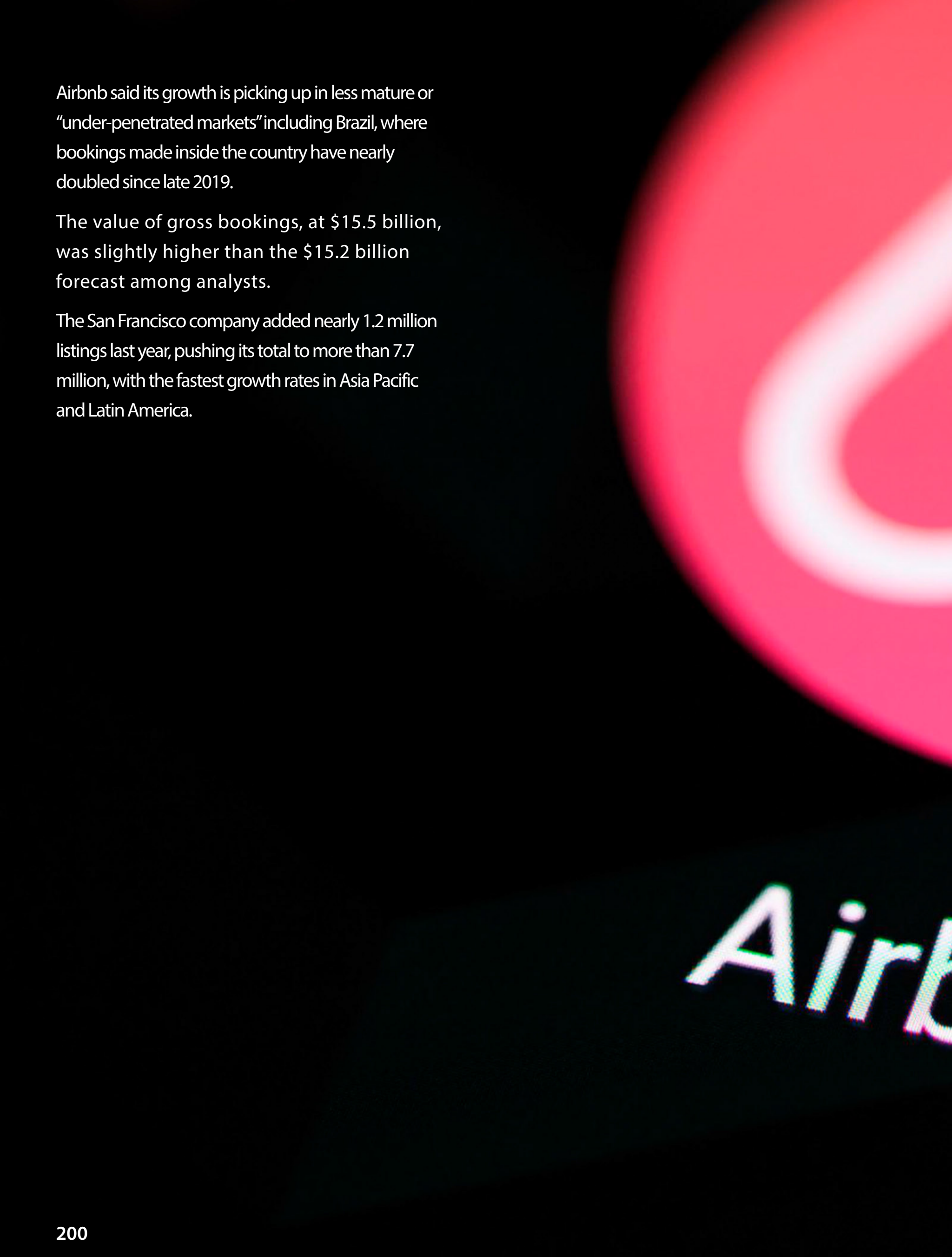
Airbnb forecast first-quarter revenue of between $2.03 billion and $2.07 billion. Analysts were looking for $2.03 billion.

The company said demand remains strong, especially among new users of the site. Bookings grew 12% from a year earlier, and picked up after "volatility" in October, which it did not explain in a letter to shareholders.

Airbnb said its growth is picking up in less mature or "under-penetrated markets" including Brazil, where bookings made inside the country have nearly doubled since late 2019.

The value of gross bookings, at $15.5 billion, was slightly higher than the $15.2 billion forecast among analysts.

The San Francisco company added nearly 1.2 million listings last year, pushing its total to more than 7.7 million, with the fastest growth rates in Asia Pacific and Latin America.



SECOND NEW GEORGIA REACTOR BEGINS SPLITTING ATOMS IN KEY STEP TO MAKING ELECTRICITY

A nuclear power plant in Georgia has begun splitting atoms in the second of its two new reactors, Georgia Power said Wednesday, a key step toward providing carbon-free electricity.

The unit of Atlanta-based Southern Co. said operators reached self-sustaining nuclear fission inside the reactor at Plant Vogtle, southeast of Augusta. That makes the heat that will be used to produce steam and spin turbines to generate electricity.

Plant Vogtle's Unit 4 is now supposed to start commercial operation sometime in the second quarter of 2024, or between April 1 and June 30. The utility earlier this month announced a delay past an earlier deadline of March 30 because of vibrations found in a cooling system.

Georgia Power said it is continuing with startup testing on Unit 4, making sure the reactor's systems can operate at the intense heat and pressure inside a nuclear reactor. Georgia Power says operators will raise power and sync up its generator to the electric grid, beginning to produce electricity. Then operators will seek to gradually raise the reactor's power to 100%.

Unit 3 began commercial operations last summer, joining two older reactors that have stood on the site for decades.

Regulators in December approved an additional 6% rate increase on Georgia Power's 2.7 million customers to pay for $7.56 billion in remaining costs at Vogtle, That's expected to cost the typical residential customer $8.95 a month, on top of the $5.42 increase that took effect when Unit 3 began operating.

The new Vogtle reactors are currently projected to cost Georgia Power and three other owners $31 billion, according to calculations. Add in $3.7 billion that original contractor Westinghouse paid Vogtle owners to walk away from construction, and the total nears $35 billion.

The reactors were originally projected to cost $14 billion and be completed by 2017.

Units 3 and 4 are the first new American reactors built from scratch in decades. Each can power 500,000 homes and businesses without releasing any carbon. But even as government officials and some utilities are again looking to nuclear power to alleviate climate change, the cost of Vogtle could discourage utilities from pursuing nuclear power.

Georgia Power owns 45.7% of the reactors, with smaller shares owned by Oglethorpe Power Corp., which provides electricity to member-owned cooperatives; the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia; and the city of Dalton.

Some Florida and Alabama utilities have also contracted to buy Vogtle's power.

MEXICAN REGULATORS TELL AMAZON TO WALL OFF PRIME TV, REVEAL ITS ALGORITHMS AND OPEN UP DELIVERY

Mexican regulators have ordered online retailers Amazon and Mercado Libre to reveal their algorithms, and to wall off TV streaming to avoid stifling competition.

Mexico's Federal Commission on Economic Competition, known by its initials as COFECE, said in a preliminary finding late Tuesday that the two firms control 85% of online sales in Mexico.

It said that market dominance created "an absence of real competitive conditions in the online retail market." For Amazon, the finding was the latest in

azon

a string of regulatory challenges it has faced in its countries of operation.

The COFECE order also covers the biggest Latin American online retailer, the Uruguay-based firm Mercado Libre.

The commission said it had laid out corrective measures that would include prohibiting Amazon from promoting its TV streaming service as an incentive for consumers to buy Amazon Prime memberships.

The commission also ordered Amazon to inform vendors on the platform "of all the variables and factors that are taken into consideration in selecting promoted items, to encourage certainty and transparency."

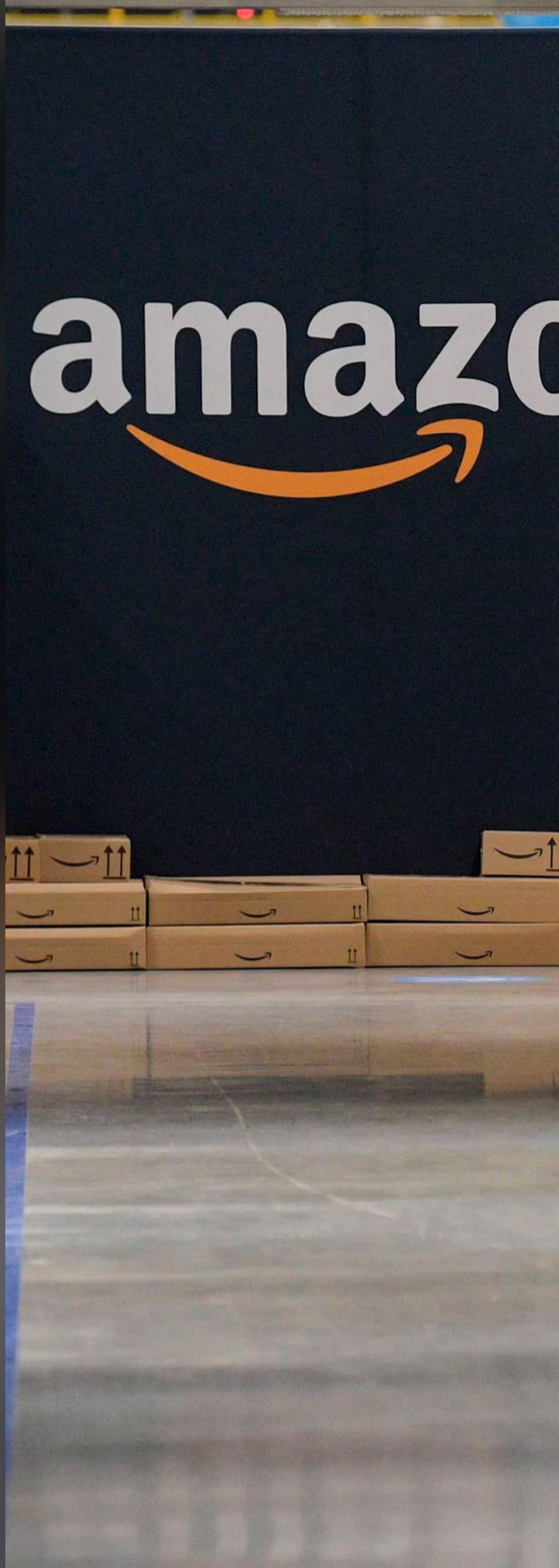
That apparently refers to the criteria used by online retailers in determining the prominence and order of search results on their platforms.

The COFECE also ordered Amazon not to take the "logistics" method — the manner of delivering purchases — into account in determining the order or prominence of search results.

Online sellers have complained in the past that Amazon Prime forces vendors to use the company's own delivery services.

Neither company immediately responded to messages seeking reaction to the order, which can be appealed.

In 2023, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and 17 states filed an antitrust lawsuit against the e-commerce giant, arguing the Seattle-based company inflates prices and stifles competition in what the agency calls the "online superstore market" and in the field of "online marketplace services."



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